

Reading the News: Pitcairn Island at the Beginning of the 21st Century

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Abstract

In the first five years of the 21st century, Pitcairn Island received more attention in the news media than at any other time in its history. This essay examines the representation of Pitcairn and its community in contemporary Australian, New Zealand and British newspapers. In particular, it analyses the reporting of the trials and convictions of seven men before the Supreme Court in late 2004 for sex offences against women and girls over a thirty year period. The aim of this paper is to measure the force of linguistic and textual norms to manage our thinking about place. It identifies and interrogates dominant patterns in descriptions of Pitcairn Island in the news in order to consider the vexed question of the relationship between the reality of islands and their representation.

Keywords: Pitcairn Island, islands, news, isolation, sex offences, *Bounty*

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Introduction

“Pitcairn is in the news, and for all the wrong reasons” (Angelo & Townend, 2003: 229).

Pitcairn Island is located approximately midway between Australia and South America, at Latitude 25°S and Longitude 130°W. It is the only inhabited island of a group of four islands, collectively named the Pitcairn Islands. The total area of the group (Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands) is 35.5 sq km; Pitcairn itself is 4.35 sq km. The entire population lives in the only settlement, Adamstown: in January 2007, 47 islanders and 15 non-islanders (administrative and correctional personnel). In his analysis of population trends on the island, Connell (1988: 193) writes “The single most important characteristic of Pitcairn is its remoteness”.

Until very recently, Pitcairn Island’s tiny economy was sustained in part by revenue earned from the sale of stamps. A “postage stamp republic” (Steinberg & McDowell, 2003: 60) is a supremely artificial construct; it creates the signs but not the substance of an active and regular correspondence between distant outposts and the metropole. In her column in *The Guardian* of May 15, 2001, Jeanette Winterson writes, “stamps were the only thing the Pitcairners had to sell to help pay for their electricity. Now that stamp collecting is deeply unsexy, the only thing left to sell is sex”. Winterson’s column was sparked by the news of allegations of sexual abuse of girls and women on the island: “Rape allegations and juvenile sex have put the island in the news” (Winterson, 2001). Her flippant suggestion that philately gave way to a sex trade for “passing sailors and tourists” is indicative of a shift in ideas about Pitcairn Island at the beginning of the 21st

century: in recent news discourse, popular notions of Pitcairn as a “bizarre legacy of the [British] Empire” and a “remote Paradise” have given way to a discourse of degeneration and dysfunction. However, this paper argues that, the revision of ideas about Pitcairn Island by the news media has not produced a reconsideration of the island’s political, geographic or symbolic status; instead, the reporting of the news of the island has worked within largely predetermined lexical and metaphoric registers.

Pitcairn Island is almost always represented as an anachronism and a geographical peculiarity. Across a whole series of interrelated discursive fields - literature, film, history, news media - Pitcairn Island is figured repeatedly as incommensurable with the contemporary world; it is both stuck in the past and off the map.¹ The argument that islands are too frequently pictured as time capsules or lost worlds is not new to island studies (DeLoughrey, 2001: 24; 2004; Péron, 2004; Hay, 2006). However, my analysis of the reporting of the trials on Pitcairn Island is intended as a caution against underestimating the impact of tropes of representation on lived island realities. As this paper will go on to demonstrate, the future of Pitcairn will involve difficult assessments of social, economic and geographic indicators against less tangible, but no less vital, measures of the island’s cultural and historical meaning in both local and international contexts. Before developing this argument in detail, this paper outlines the background to the 2004 trials and surveys the news coverage.

The Trials

In 1997, the “first ever external administration official of any kind” (Aldrich & Connell, 1998: 34) was sent to Pitcairn. After a number of allegations of sexual assault, Britain posted a police officer on the island for six to eight weeks a year. In 1999 the officer, Gail Cox of the Kent Constabulary, reported two complaints of sexual assault. The investigation which followed - codenamed “Operation Unique” - led to 64 criminal charges under British law against nine men. Seven of the men were arraigned to appear before the Supreme Court of Pitcairn Islands on 22 August 2003. The charges triggered a series of complex legal challenges to Britain’s administration of Pitcairn before the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal (Angelo & Townend, 2003; Angelo & Wright, 2004; Power, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Trenwith, 2003; Wright, 2005). The Defence sought to have the charges dismissed through a number of pre-trial applications, “the most fundamental of which is to challenge the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom over the Pitcairn Islands” (Supreme Court of the Pitcairn Islands, 2004: para. 4).

Counts of rape and indecent assault were brought against the men under British law: Sections 1 and 14 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956. The trials of seven of the men (Steve Christian, Dave Brown, Len Brown, Dennis Christian, Randy Christian, Terry Young and Jay Warren) commenced on 29 September 2004 before the Supreme Court. On 11 October, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council granted the islanders leave to appeal the pre-trial judgments, but declined to grant a stay of proceedings. Instead, they directed the Court to continue hearing evidence while it was still fresh and, if the men were convicted, to indicate appropriate sentences. In findings announced on 24

¹ Ironically, this discourse of temporal and spatial isolation is fuelled by the stories of writers who have visited the island. The most influential account of contemporary life on the island is Birkett (1997). A more recent example is Souhami (2007).

October the court acquitted Jay Warren of the single charge of indecent assault, but entered convictions against the six remaining men:

- Steve Christian was convicted of five counts of rape related to a period between 1964 and 1972. He received indicative sentences of two and three years (to be served concurrently).
- Dave Brown was convicted of six sexual offences. He was given an indicative sentence of 400 hours community work and two years supervision.
- Len Brown was convicted of two counts of rape of a teenage girl between 1969 and 1972 when he was 46 years old. His sentence was indicated to be two years imprisonment for each charge (to be served concurrently).
- Dennis Christian entered guilty pleas to ten charges relating to sexual offences against a girl aged between 12 and 14 years between February 1972 and March 1974 when he was aged 15 to 17. He received an indicative sentence, 300 hours community work, and two years supervision.
- Terry Young was convicted of six counts of indecent assault and one representative charge of rape against complainants aged under 16 years. He received an indicative sentence of five years' imprisonment for the rape charge and six months' for the indecent assaults (to be served concurrently).
- Randall Christian had convictions entered for four counts of rape and five of indecent assault. He was given an indication of a sentence of six years' imprisonment for the rapes and twelve months for the indecent assaults (to be served concurrently).

When “Operation Unique” commenced there was no clear legislative, judicial or correctional infrastructure in place to enable the trials or enforce any sentences. As a result, the British and New Zealand governments cooperated to replace a “relatively simple pre-1999 criminal justice system with an extensive array of new laws and institutions” (Angelo & Townend, 2003: 231). Around 40 new Ordinances were introduced between 1999 and 2003. The story of the governance and administration of Pitcairn Island in the 21st century exemplifies a problem at the heart of the rule of sub-national island jurisdictions: the complexity and scope of the legal apparatus from the governing state becomes unwieldy when transplanted to small and distant overseas territories. During the sentence hearing, Public Defender Paul Dacre asked the judges to consider the fundamental mismatch between British law and the population of Pitcairn: “We are talking about 50 people living on a rock, not 50 million people in England” (Marks, 2004c). Journalists frequently describe the case as “one of the strangest in legal history” (Marks, 2004c; *see also* Harvey, 2004b; Beveridge, 2004).

The News

The disproportionate scale between Britain and its last remaining colony in the Pacific was one of the factors which kept the story in the news. When sentencing the men, the

trial judges noted the “enormous and unprecedented international publicity” (Harvey, 2004f) of the case in the news media. What are the “news values” (Bell, 1998: 74) at play in the reporting of the trials on Pitcairn Island? In a feature article for *The Australian* weekend magazine, Harvey (2004d: 17) reports that the “six-week trial ... made Pitcairn Island the focus of international fascination and revulsion”. She writes:

Pitcairn Island has always been famous. Before these trials, it was known as the world’s most remote inhabited island, the secret hideaway of Fletcher Christian and his band of British sailors who mutinied aboard His Majesty’s Armed Vessel *Bounty* in 1789 and abducted a group of Tahitian women to be their wives. Just 47 people live on the island today. Suddenly at the end of September, Pitcairn became notorious. The trial was reported from Kazakhstan to Bahrain.

To what extent was the enormous interest in the trials fed by the enduring continental fascination with tropical islands and with this island in particular? The increase in media coverage during the trials reflects their status as a key event in the island’s history. However, I think it is clear that interest was enhanced by the knowledge that trials were to take place *on* the island, rather than in the UK or New Zealand.² There are clearly shared assumptions at play in the discourses of rule and representation in relation to Pitcairn Island: the label “Operation Unique” is in tune with the news descriptions of the island’s exceptional geography, history and culture.

The “logistical drama” (Harvey, 2004a) of holding trials on Pitcairn was a news story in itself. The personnel and machinery of British justice travelled for more than five days to reach the island. The “flotilla of lawyers, judges and police officers” (Clark, 2004) that sailed to the island was accompanied by six journalists. Radio New Zealand’s (2004) “Mediawatch” asked Pitcairn’s Deputy Governor Matthew Forbes why the British authorities allowed journalists to go to the island: “Well we decided that we ought to take the press along to Pitcairn, sort of in the interests of open justice and making sure that the story of the trials was told”. He added that many journalists applied to go to the island in recent years, but “those applications have gone through the Island’s Council who traditionally have declined applications from journalists”. For Forbes however, the trials were a “different scenario ... a major event happening on the island which obviously has attracted interest from around the world, and not least because of the sort of historical context it takes place in”. The comments from the journalists themselves in the “Mediawatch” report suggest a blurring of news genres of crime reporting and travel writing from the outset. Neil Tweedie from the *Daily Telegraph* in London anticipated the trials would be a “big story in Britain”. He says “it will grab peoples’ imagination because it really is quite a unique story. There really isn’t a story that I can think of that ticks all the boxes like this in terms of remoteness,

² In 2002 and 2003, the British and New Zealand governments entered into an agreement to enable the Pitcairn Courts to sit in New Zealand and allow for any sentences to be served in New Zealand. The agreement took legislative effect in the Pitcairn Trials Act 2002 (NZ) and the Judicature Amendment Ordinance 2003 (Pit.); however, in June 2004 the islanders argued successfully for their right to be tried at home. A panel of judges sitting in the Supreme Court of Pitcairn Islands in Auckland directed the island’s British administrators to conduct the trials on the island and rejected their claims that the logistics and expense of taking the court to the Pacific were “insuperable” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2003).

the intimacy of it in terms of the community”. *The Independent’s* Asia-Pacific correspondent Kathy Marks also stresses the island’s remoteness: “I am certain this will be one of the most interesting, unusual and bizarre assignments that I’ve had so far. ... Of course Pitcairn is a place most people have never been to and never will go to. Just to visit a place like that, even if nothing was going on, would be quite fascinating. At a time of a quite sensational trial I think it will be quite extraordinary”. Claire Harvey from *The Australian* newspaper, and Ewart Barnsley from Television New Zealand, both nominate reporting from Pitcairn as the most remote assignment in their careers. Barnsley goes so far as to compare the journalists to the mutineers who settled the island: “At the end of the day’s assignment we can’t just go back to the office – there’s no support whatsoever, we’re out there, we’re marooned, we’re like the original mutineers, we’re stranded on an island whether we like it or not”.

The six men convicted in 2004 all bear the surnames of British sailors who settled Pitcairn in January 1790, eight months after they set their captain, William Bligh, adrift in the launch of the *Bounty*. In a paper presented at the University of Tasmania, Young (2006) emphasised the lack of factual public knowledge about Pacific islands in the century before the mutiny. He argued it is likely that when, in 1790, the mutineers from the *Bounty* saw Pitcairn on the horizon, their view of the place was filtered through imperial fantasies about tropical islands exemplified by *Robinson Crusoe*. In 2004, when Australian, New Zealand and British journalists looked towards Pitcairn they too looked through a shared lens; the view of Pitcairn offered in newspaper reports is remarkably consistent.³ Denning writes “Islands lie behind the screen of the sea. A screen as large as the Pacific thoroughly sifts the life that reaches an island” (Denning, 1994: 307). News stories about Pitcairn are always mediated by a complex of texts and images about the geography and history of tropical islands and of Pitcairn Island in particular. Denning’s metaphor of a screen is doubly pertinent here: a screen can be both a surface for the display of images or text and a fine netting used as a barrier or filter. In the case of Pitcairn the statement “Islands lie behind the screen of the sea” gestures both to the projection of imaginary islands over a real landscape and the multitudinous threads of text and thought which filter contemporary perceptions of the island and its people.

The focus on the island’s remoteness - its isolation - in news discourse about the trials is the anchor for a whole series of much more problematic and disturbing claims about the island and its inhabitants. One of the most common descriptors of Pitcairn in newspaper reports of the trials is the “world’s most remote inhabited island” (or “territory”) (e.g. Harvey, 2004h; Marks, 2004a). Journalists draw upon a limited lexicon of adjectives and nouns to label Pitcairn. Countless articles call it a “tiny rock”, “outcrop” or “speck” in the “middle of the Pacific”. Almost every article published during the trials describes it as “remote”. The ubiquity of such terms and the focus on size and distance is more than simply a function of accurate description.

Garrett and Bell (1998: 4) describe news as the “most prestigious of daily media genres”; they locate news “at the centre of the exercise of power in modern societies”. On the surface, the prestige of news follows from its claim to “facticity” (Bell, 1998:

³ Farbotko (2005) uses a similar metaphor – of a shared lens – in her analysis of the representation of Tuvalu in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Her claim that news media enacts a “discursive negotiation of the identity of geographically distant islands” (*ibid.*: 280) resonates with my work in this article.

65). But, as Bell (1998: 65) insists: “[n]ews content is not independent of its expression”. He writes:

“News stories are regularly not saying what we think they are saying on first reception. They are not telling a simple, clear tale, but are replete with ambiguity, unclarity, discrepancy and cavity” (Bell, 1998: 66).

The news coverage of the trials on Pitcairn has produced a rich archive of articles for comparative textual analysis. As Denning (1997: 10) puts it: “To outsiders, Pitcairn has always been larger than itself ...” As I have already remarked, the remarkable number of news reports published about the trials seems disproportionate to the island’s size. The on-line duplication of newspapers and the ready availability of electronic databases of media publications only increase the sense of Pitcairn as a site of textual overload. What other functions does this burgeoning archive of news texts about the island perform besides the reporting of events? Close textual reading and critical discourse analysis - the core business of literary and cultural studies - are the key tools for addressing this question.

Strangeness, Isolation and Mutiny

In the first issue of *Island Studies Journal*, Hay (2006: 29) expresses his frustration with “literary and cultural studies perspectives that dismiss the physicality of islands whilst promoting the relevance of metaphorical abstractions”. For Hay, the problem with taking metaphor as the starting point for analysis seems to be its pessimism: postcolonial scholars in particular emphasize the durability and force of a negative metaphoric; he says that they conclude that “[i]slandness is a dysfunctional state” (2006: 28). To make a simple, but critical, point: scholarship can only ever apprehend the meaning of place through language. The physicality of Pitcairn Island is ultimately inseparable from its textual topography. From my perspective, good textual analysis is never just interested in the question of what texts say, but is motivated instead by asking what texts do. As Garrett and Bell argue, media texts “reflect and influence the formation and expression of culture, politics and social life” (1998: 4). The conclusion “Islandness is a dysfunctional state” circumscribes every aspect of the case of Pitcairn; this claim echoes through statements from all of the various news actors in the case: lawyers, judges, police, colonial administrators, church officials, journalists *and* the islanders themselves. Hay (2006: 30) concedes the value of analyses of metaphor “when metaphoric transcriptions of islands rebound upon *real* islands and influence life there”. The most striking feature of the news coverage of the trials is the dominance and apparent stability of a lexicon for descriptions of the island. For Harvey (2004b), “Isolation is the whole point of Pitcairn”. As cited above, Marks (2004b) describes the trial as “one of the strangest in British legal history”. The guiding terms of the news discourse are “strangeness” and “isolation.” In an article published in *The Independent* in the week before the trials commenced, Souhami (2004) writes:

“Pitcairn Island’s strange history and the vast Pacific Ocean define its isolation. It is inordinately difficult to get there”.

Watkin (2002) reports on the impact of “Operation Unique” on Pitcairn in an article entitled “Lonely Island Weathering the Storm”. The article’s first two sentences

describe a community isolated by both its geography and a “culture of secrets”: “Secrecy surrounds Pitcairn Island as completely as the Pacific Ocean. Like the boundless sea and sky, it’s always been a part of their life”. Marks (2004b) employs a similar metaphoric in the lead to her article “Law Descends on Pitcairn Island”:

“Pitcairn guards its secrets as jealously as the vast Pacific that encircles it, extending to an unbroken horizon in every direction”.

Bell explains, “The news story is always focused in its first sentence ... the lead itself is a microstory even when a full story follows” (1998: 69). Throughout the coverage of the trials, *setting* is almost always the key narrative element in the first sentence, but this focus on place (and, less explicitly, time) does more than just state the location of characters and events. The setting is not just a container for human action, but a key player in the way the tale unfolds. The story which follows the first sentence in the articles cited above and the many they exemplify is driven less by the denotative function of the lead sentence than by its performative function; descriptions of Pitcairn do not so much point to the existence of an actual place in the Pacific Ocean as they work to produce a very particular picture of Pitcairn Island for readers.

DeLoughrey (2004: 302) writes, “Island narratives have travelled extensively even if islanders themselves were positioned in bounded terms”. Published narratives about Pitcairn have rarely been generated from the island itself; instead they are typically the work of visitors who travel to the island by sea or, much more commonly, in their imagination. Throughout the news discourse, the drama of Pitcairn Island is about the clash of the known and unknown; it is a tale of concealment and revelation in which the efforts to shed light on the island’s recent past are an “invasion” from the outside (the world of the reporters and their readers). The idea of secrecy is implicit in the opening to Harvey’s “Dirty Laundry of Dark Toytown”, published in *The Australian* as the trials began:

“In the dusty morning light invading Pitcairn Island’s only shop, a man in bare feet and a loose grey T-shirt leans over the deep-freeze and half smiles: ‘We don’t like reporters here’, says Dave Brown, idly picking up a bag of laundry pegs and turning it over in his hands” (Harvey, 2004b).

The islanders are repeatedly depicted as guardians of the truth, of the histories buried in their collective “deep freeze”. Harvey is unsurprised by Brown’s resistance to the trials (he is, after all, one of the accused) but she is astonished that “one of his alleged victims” stands “only metres away” talking loudly with her sister and other island women. The key to tracing emotive shifts from fantasy to fear in the news discourse is the significance of the island’s distance from continental population centres Harvey acknowledges “It sounds idyllic...” but Pitcairn is simply too far away for safety; she writes “isolation is a menace for Pitcairn” (Harvey, 2004b).

This construction of an imagined place is not, of course, the effect of individual news stories; instead such articles contribute to a cumulative discursive effect. News stories are part of a complex matrix of intersecting texts which work together to construct our thinking about place and, in particular, its significance in human experience.

If “strangeness” and “isolation” are the terms which manage the description of the setting, the term which holds sway at the level of genre is “mutiny”. Mutiny is always, in a fundamental sense, a sign of institutional dysfunction; even when the precise cause of mutiny is uncertain it amounts to a failure of command and a shattering of order. Two out of every three articles published about the trials refer to the mutiny on the *Bounty*; many of these recall the famous films inspired by the history. In October 2004, *The Australian* newspaper reported that defence barristers acting for the accused “even invoked the ghost of William Bligh” (Harvey, 2004g). One of the lawyers, in his submissions for Dave Brown, said:

“Many years ago the events that made Pitcairn a part of folklore, of romantic and historical writing, were at least allegedly caused by one man’s inhumanity and inability to understand other men ... I ask for mercy, for Dave Brown, here, many years later ...” (*ibid.*)

As Dave Brown’s lawyer says, the mutiny on the *Bounty* has inspired numerous “romantic and historical” texts. The news discourse reveals the impossibility of making neat distinctions between the romance and the history in the narratives which circulate about Pitcairn’s past (and its present). Marks (2004b), writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, sees the international concern about the impact of the trials on Pitcairn’s future as a direct result of threats to widely-shared fantasies:

“Such is the lure of the *Bounty* [*sic.*] legend, romanticised in five Hollywood films, that people around the world regard the island as a metaphor for Paradise”.

For Harvey, it is newsworthy that the “accused bear the names of the rebel British sailors ... who ... fled to Pitcairn Island with their Tahitian lovers” (2004c). The *only* explanation for the ubiquity of terms like “Paradise” and “lovers” in the press on the trials is the force of the novels and films which imagine the story behind the island’s settlement.⁴

As Denning shows in his unparalleled 1994 study *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language*, the narrative of the mutiny on the *Bounty* - in its historical, literary and filmic incarnations - is a tale about secrecy. Throughout the journalism about the present-day scandal, Bligh’s bewilderment about his failure to see the rebellion coming is a model for Britain’s shock at the revelation of sexual crimes on Pitcairn. The copious references to the *Bounty* perform a number of related functions in news reports about the trials on the island; some of these functions are more benign than others.

Because of Pitcairn Island’s extraordinary and famous history the trials draw some of their news value from their novelty and the fame of the news actors (Bell, 1998: 74). Fletcher Christian and William Bligh are named again and again in the news reports. Of

⁴ Numerous historical fictions of page and screen tell the story of the mutiny on the *Bounty*. The most influential literary account of the mutiny and the settlement of Pitcairn is Nordhoff and Hall’s (1964) trilogy, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Men Against the Sea*, and *Pitcairn’s Island*, first published in the early 1930s. The first novel was the source text for two feature films, both called *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935; 1962). *The Bounty* (1984), directed by Roger Donaldson, was based upon the book *Captain Bligh & Mr. Christian* by Richard Hough (1972). For a comprehensive list of literary and film texts about the island and its history, see Maxton (2008).

course, the familiarity of these names and the story of the mutiny provides some coherence to counter the “discontinuous non-chronological time structure of contemporary news stories” (Bell, 1998: 99) and, more particularly, to counter the near impossibility of making sense of Pitcairn’s recent history in a short news article. The legal complexities of the trials are not easily summarised in a headline or lead sentence. More troublingly, almost without exception, the references to the island’s history are to the genealogy of the accused; this is particularly the case in relation to Steven Christian, the great-great-great-great-grandson of Fletcher Christian. Tweedie (2004) describes the place and its inhabitants as direct descendants of British imperialism:

“After 215 years on the run, it seems, the mutineers from the *Bounty* have finally had their comeuppance”.

This comparison of present news actors and narratives with those from the distant past is so prevalent in the news reporting of the trials that it amounts to a collapsing of accounts of 20th century horror into a famous late 18th century tale about male authority and violence.

The news about Pitcairn Island suggests the mutual inflection of ideologies of biological and geographical determinism which involve ideas about gender, race and class in quite distinctive ways.⁵ The question at the heart of the news discourse is one of inheritance. Harvey makes this question explicit when she asks:

“Is this what human beings come down to? ... Alone on a tiny, isolated place without police officers, do small groups instinctively begin to abuse each other?” Harvey (2004d: 17)

Harvey also quotes Detective Inspector Robert Vinson, the police officer in charge of “Operation Unique”:

‘There was a culture passed down from family to family, and a group of men who perpetrated abuse on every girl they could. Their fathers and grandfathers were doing exactly the same things,’ Vinson says. ‘Was it because of isolation? Or was it just because they could? I don’t know the answer. Maybe the truth is that if you leave people to their own devices, without any recourse to outside authority, a male-dominated structure will emerge and the whole community will just become animalistic’ Harvey (2004d: 17).

In a sense, the men and the island become jointly culpable. Edmond (2006: 216) nominates islands as “the most anthropomorphic of landforms.” The prevalence of human body / island analogies is apparent in many of the headlines: e.g. “Incest Island” (Phillips, 2004); “Bounty Isle Sex Beasts Face Prison” (Parker, 2004); “Sex Case proves Some Men are Islands” (Mackenzie, 2004).

⁵ Consideration of ideologies of class falls outside this paper’s analysis of the representation of the Pitcairn trials in the news; class is not an explicit theme in the discourse. However, as Denning (1994) and Edmond (1997) show, anxieties about class privilege are central to the progress of both historical and fictional accounts of the mutiny on the *Bounty*; one approach to investigating the significance of class in present-day representations of Pitcairn would be to compare the recent journalism to the reporting of the trials of the mutineers in the late 18th century British and colonial press.

Numerous island studies scholars (e.g. Beer, 1989: 6; DeLoughrey, 2001: 21-22; Edmond, 2006: 201; Peckham, 2003: 501; Royle, 2007: 48) have reflected on the value and impact of John Donne's proposition "No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe". Throughout the news reports, man *is* an island. This is not meant to be an ambiguous point. Not only has the name Fletcher Christian become coterminous with the name of the island (Pitcairn is still "Fletcher's Island"), but the community's genealogy is almost always traced from the mutineers to the present-day male population. To cite a typical example from *The Australian*:

"The island was settled in 1790 by Fletcher Christian and his band of rebel British sailors after the mutiny on the *Bounty*. The guilty men all claim some mutineer ancestry" (Harvey, 2004e).

The women who were complainants in the trials share the men's ancestry, but the bloodline which seems to matter in the news discourse is always male to male. This is clearest in descriptions of the main defendant in the trials, Steven Christian. Reports about him are repeatedly funnelled through the popular characterization of Fletcher Christian as the island's leader and a defiant subject of the Crown. In these terms, the present-day news discourse is managed by our shared cultural memory of *Bounty* narratives on page and screen.

Journalists commonly classify the men on trial as "mutineers", "rebels" and sometimes "pirates" standing up to the British government (the "William Bligh" of the present day story). For instance, the British newspaper *The Sun* reports that "British justice finally caught up with the island descendants of Fletcher Christian 215 years after the mutiny" (Phillips, 2004). The complainants in the trials are, of course, also Pitcairners, but according to the news discourse, it seems that women don't make sense as "mutineers". During the investigation, thirty-two women who grew up on the island reported some form of sexual abuse, but only a handful of them agreed to give evidence in the trials. I am yet to find a news article which uses the idea of "mutiny" to frame the story of the women's actions: there is no disagreement that Steve Christian is the most powerful figure on the island - the "leader of the pack" (Harvey, 2004i) - but the decision of women like Jacqui Christian to stand up to him and the other men simply doesn't gel with the character matrix provided by popular narratives of the mutiny.

In the emotional geography of the news discourse, the identity of the accused men and the identity of the island become one and the same. This is clearest in reports about the potential impact of guilty verdicts on the future viability of the territory. The key concern is that prison sentences would deprive the community of their "able-bodied men"; this phrase is used again and again by both journalists and news actors quoted in reports. Meralda Warren, an islander who has opposed the trials from the outset, makes the link between the body of the island and the body of its men explicit; she says: "They've picked on all the viable young men, the ones who are the backbone of this place" (Marks, 2004d). However, to read these aspects of the Pitcairn news as evidence that man *is* an island is to prioritize the dominant narrative about its distant and recent history.

“Collision of Worlds”

Newspaper articles about the island’s recent history typically describe a remote outpost of the British Empire, only just connected to centres of civilization by curious and unreliable routes for travel and communication. “In whatever terms”, Edmond (2006: 201) remarks, “positively or negatively, islands have always been ‘othered’ by continents”. Pitcairn Island is an extreme example of this process, in part because it is only accessible by sea, typically a three day sail from the nearest landfall at Mangareva in the Gambier archipelago. Beer (1989: 21) points out:

“... it is the technology of the airplane which has most changed the island concept ... The island is no longer a fortress, defended by the sea”.

But Pitcairn Island is not accessible by air; it still offers, to use Baldacchino’s (2004: 272) term, the traditional island “signature” of a “geographically finite, total, discrete, sharply precise physical entity which accentuates clear and holistic notions of location and identity”.

Before going to Pitcairn to cover the trials, one of the journalists said: “In a way it’s like stepping back in time...” (Radio New Zealand, 2004). This apparently simple idea has profound consequences for the news discourse about the trials. In particular it underpins the frequent reporting of the trials as a “collision of worlds” (Harvey, 2004b; Godwin 2006: 5). The implicit message is that the sexual crimes committed on Pitcairn took place in a world ruled by a moral order that does not belong to the present. An editorial in the *New Zealand Herald* explains the international media interest in the trials as a function of “fascination and horror”:

Fascination because anything to do with that lonely refuge of the Bounty mutineers has its own fascination, and horror, because, while the sexual abuse of young girls is sickening enough anywhere, it seems particularly frightful in such a tiny, enclosed community. (The Editor)

To what extent does the media response to the trials on Pitcairn amount to a collective disowning or expulsion of an aberrant habitus? DeLoughrey (2004: 301) writes “As with the colonial British constructions of islands, the timeless and atemporal isle can only signify as such when it is constructed in binary opposition to the modern history and urbanized geography of its continental visitors”. The enduring popularity of island adventure narratives in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries was arguably more a function of colonial readers’ interest in reinforcing their view of themselves than in discovering distant places or peoples. A similar process is at work in the telling of stories about life on Pacific islands in the early 21st century.

Conclusion

This article reads the news about the trials on Pitcairn to show that the unprecedented media interest in the island in late 2004 was fuelled by popular conceptions of islands as settings for scandal and adventure. The reporting of the trials reveals the blurred line between real and imagined islands through constant references to the mutiny on the *Bounty*. Further, the men on trial, the mutineers, and the island itself become mutually

defining figures in the 2004 news discourse. In October 2006, the Privy Council refused the appeal against the islanders' convictions unanimously. The men began serving their sentences on the island in November 2006, two years after they were sentenced. In January 2007, two more Pitcairners, Shawn Christian and Brian Young, were convicted of rape and related offences in a special sitting of the Pitcairn Supreme Court in Auckland; their case attracted very little international media interest.

At the time of writing (December 2007), Pitcairn rarely rates a mention in the press; but when it does the impact of the story of the trials is very clear. In September 2007, my local paper posted a short article about a job vacancy on Pitcairn:

“Wanted: Someone with a sense of adventure to teach on a tiny Pacific island famous for mutineers and a history of endemic incest and rape” (Gridneff, 2007).

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