

# A Reflection on Greg Dening's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* and Its Relation to the Pitcairn Island Language

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I should say that the language of Pitcairn – surely a sign of socialising forces – was English, well, English enough to be recognised and understood by visitors from outside. Out of a polyglot of dialects – Philadelphian American English, London cockney, Aberdeen and Ross-shire Scotts, as well as dialects of the North Country, Guernsey Island, St Kitts in the West Indies, Cornwall and Manx – came an English that has delighted phonologists. But it was not Tahitian. And we have the puzzle that English was the language of power – shall we say of the Sea? – and Tahitian the language of everyday social life – shall we say the Land? (Dening 1992: 322)

Fiction is too disrespectful of the generations of archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians and scholars of all description who have helped us to know what we know. (Dening 2004: 9)

## What Oceans Say

In this speculative essay I review what Greg Dening's (1992) volume *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* and its association with all things *Bounty* might offer research into the Pitcairn Island language generally and my own work specifically. The writing style is submitted as an entrée to a larger work I intend to write in the coming years dealing with the linguistics, sociology, and spatiality of Pitcairn Island place and people.

I assess how *Bounty* is posed and presented vis-à-vis language in Dening's treatise of and on Mr Bligh's and the *Bounty's* language. And I use the *Bounty* concept and trope as a metonym for Pitcairn Island to reveal how the Pitcairn language is understudied in Pacific contact linguistics and history. I distinguish roughly between 'Bounty' (no article) and 'the *Bounty*' (definite article). Both *Bounties* can be literal and metaphorical. I explain these definitions through explicating arguments. I use creative and experimental writing as a means to explore my own pilgrimage to Pitcairn Island; *Bounty*, Pitcairn Island, Bligh, and Christian all amalgamate in this eclectic mix of language, people, and self. I make no excuses for the personal nature of my writing, and defer to some vintage Dening in order to lay the theoretical ground for what follows here and in my future work:

I tell students: take your freedoms, but somewhere, for the sake of your future, write little reflections—in a preface, in an appendix, somewhere—where you face up to the disadvantages as well as the advantages of what you are doing. Show that you know what your difference is. Play your distinctiveness against the approaches of others—not negatively, not even critically—just to show the examiners [of a thesis] you weren't acting out of ignorance or laziness to do it your way. (Dening 2000: no pagination)

Dening's historical and ethnographic writings on the *Bounty* are some of the most well known in their respective fields, at least on the Australian side of the Pacific. He poses much of

his work as a play, theatre, with acts, characters, and props, the most notable and significant being the *Bounty* vessel itself, and the event of its 1789 mutiny, an incident dreams and nightmares have been and are still made of:

This 'Bounty' is a sort of Platonic idea, a Kantian noumenon of 'sailingness'. It is a theatrical prop, plastic enough for comedy, tragedy, irony – any mode of history that one would like to make of it. (Denning 1992: 4)

In Denning's descriptions of the mastery of the ocean by the Polynesians is a clear depth of proficiency in his ability to entice and convince the reader. He is persuasive, and offers the *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island enthusiast something upon which to hedge their bets. The writer, who died in 2008, has several works attributed to his ethnographic transactions and historical conduct with The Ship (*Bounty*). One of Denning's key episodes of interaction with *Bounty* is his episodic *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, power and theatre on the Bounty* (hereinafter *Mr Bligh's*). Published in 1992, this entire volume and more specifically the section named 'Mr Bligh's Bad Language' (pp. 55-87) lay bare a summit of Denning's *Bounty*-directed thought, a progression moving through his two books from 1988—*The Bounty: An Ethnographic History and Islands and Beaches*—towards the more pointed, almost dreamlike state of *Mr Bligh's*. The scent of Denning's 1990 chapter 'Ethnography on my mind' is developed in *Mr Bligh's*, the result being a *pièce de résistance* in the oeuvre of the ethnographic historian of *Bounty*, Polynesia, and the Pacific. Still, questions remain: to what extent is language the glue in matters *Bounty*, Pitcairn Island, Tahiti, and Polynesia? And further, how can this mix better inform our modern (mis)understandings of the Pitcairn Island language, Pitcairn? It is these questions to which I intend to proffer an answer.

*Mr Bligh's Bad Language* is no doubt an appealing title. Surely it would offer some depth of insight of the language which developed on, in, and of The Ship, the supporting receptacle of so much which eventually came to pass on Pitcairn Island and elsewhere. The language—Pitcairn, that is, not necessarily Bligh's—is a distinct way of speaking which eventually made it to Norfolk Island, New Zealand, and even Australia and has persisted for more than 200 years post-mutiny. I suspect it is with a similar fervour that Pacific language scholars and historians may have searched and scrounged in Denning's thick description, looking for rarefied philological gems in a comparable fashion and mould to that of more conventional linguistic history. Was there any Polynesian syntax, anymore than a few nasty Blighian expressions focused on the motley crew, which have been mentioned elsewhere? In my opinion, such an aficionado will remain ungratified, not that the task of offering more to the linguist was necessarily Denning's prerogative to provide. It is to this lacuna to which I partly dedicate my piece.

It is necessary to present at least my interpretation of the disciplinary ground upon which Denning stands. He is definitely not a language scholar nor does he claim such. He is an ethnographic historian. He claims his discipline of ethnographic history is "an attempt to represent the past as it was experienced in such a way that we understand both its ordered and its disordered natures" (Denning 1992: 5). A reconciliation of the neatness and obvious lack thereof in anything historically *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island related makes Denning a brave voyager on the task he has set himself. Regarding his approach to documenting the *Bounty*, his re-texting of pasts and re-presenting transformed worlds into words, he claims his method is "about history, about power, about symbol making, about force and freedom, about theatre" (Denning 1992: 5). It is these theatrics about the *Bounty* and the concomitant literary freedom and personal theatrics Denning allowed himself in his academic and obviously covert emotionally driven musings about the *Bounty* on which I muse and reassess.

In parallel, I must make my position clear. I am a linguist. More specifically a toponymist (placenames researcher). My work has had much to do with Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island but little to do with the *Bounty* directly. Still, several placenames, business names, and cultural events on Norfolk Island are riddled with *Bounty*-inspired matter. Norfolk Island's *Bounty Tours*, *Bounty Divers*, *Bounty Excursions*, *Bounty Folk Museum*, *Bounty Lodge*, and *The Mutiny on the Bounty Show*, a dramatised re-enactment of the mutiny, all *Bounty*-fy the island; *Bligh Street*, *Fletcher Christian Apartments*, *John Adams Road*, and *Pitcairn Place* maintain attachment to the sordid yet reinvented events of the *Bounty* through a specific personalisation and name form (Nash 2013/2014). There is Bounty Day on Pitcairn Island (23 January) and Bounty Day on Norfolk Island (8 June). In addition, I have skirted the edges of *Bounty* as an abstraction, theme, and linguistic emblem as seen in the placenames and signs of Norfolk Island. Pitcairn Island also seems to be quite *Bounty*-ful, if you pardon the pun. After all, what and where would Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island be language and history wise *sans Bounty*?

Having conducted fieldwork on Norfolk Island from 2007-2012, and having already worked with Pitcairn Islanders in Australia and New Zealand in 2015, in 2016 I embarked on a three-month stint of fieldwork on Pitcairn Island. Travelling to Pitcairn Island completed a cycle. Although the cargo ship *Claymore II* I sailed on with my family from Tauranga, New Zealand to Pitcairn Island via Mangareva is not the precise route the *Bounty* took when it was travelling east deep into the South Pacific in the late 1700s, in many ways this pilgrimage travelled a comparable course. It is here I make parallels between Denning's and my work. There may have been no beach crossings—Pitcairn Island has no significantly sized beach nor am I a sunlover—but, like Marshall Sahlins (1988) would have us consider in his *Islands of History*, there were crossings of ideas, islands, history, and language. I was the first professional linguist ever to have travelled to Pitcairn Island. And that, too, on the back my six fieldtrips to Norfolk Island, another 'home of the bounty folk' (Figure 1).

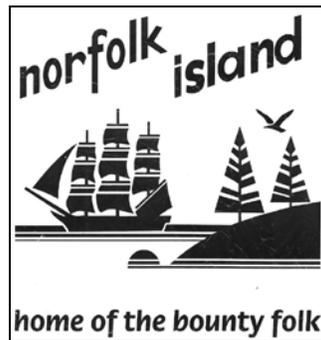


Figure 1 - The slogan 'home of the bounty folk' as featured on a Norfolk Island shopping bag, c. 2004

### ***Bounty Stuff***

Denning melds. The synthetic blend of disciplines, stories, and land-sea he creates poses *Bounty* as a microscope, a means, and a vantage point to delve into relatively unplumbed language realms. I have purposefully chosen as my analysis Denning's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* and not his *The Bounty* (1988). In this sense, my treatment of (the) *Bounty* is more heuristically language focused than opportunistically bountiful. I wish to see the extent to which Denning leads

his reader on the course he wishes. I restrict myself mainly to the section 'Mr Bligh's Bad Language' (Denning 1992: 55-87), a section which fits in conveniently under 'Act One. The Ship, Scene i, Narrative'. This positioning is not arbitrary; it is *Bounty* within which Denning sees as the place of language.

"To borrow a nautical phrase is not to become nautical" (Denning 1992: 56). To this the author adds that the language of the seamen used to describe their eighteenth century 'wooded world' seems to be "incongruous and laughable on land". Through an othering of the 'wooded world' presented as a metonym for the maritime vessel, *Bounty* and its locals achieve distinction from the continental. Their language of "[p]recision, economy, definitional correspondence" (Denning 1992: 57) is diametrically opposed to any language of the continents. Using his own historical and historicised language, Denning achieves and creates a "remarkable sense of rhythm and tempo". He speculates about the worded-with-wood domains where Bligh fell short in his closeness to those sailors around him, workers and officers whose job it was to realise the relationship between their wooded universe of inside the *Bounty* with the outside wind, land, sea, and expanse.

At this stage we should take a step back from Bligh, *Bounty*, and any ideas of linguistic resurrection or damnation and wander into some technical linguistic exploration relating to contemporaneous Pacific contact languages that had been and were extant in Polynesia. I intend to extract that which is essential to an interpretation of a post *Bounty* and Polynesian influence on the Pitcairn language in terms of the overarching tendencies of language contact in and around Polynesia at the time.

With Bligh losing his grip, especially in Tahiti, the linguistic cracks started to show, as did similar cultural rebellion in the form of tattoos on officers' skin. The obscenities of Bligh towards his men took their toll; the use of interspersed Tahitian terms like 'mammoo!' (silence) in order to breed familiarity and a sense of a shared experience with the non-Europeans was a great dislike for Bligh. What a shame that Denning's (1992: 61) perspicacious claim is so true: "Language is notoriously difficult to recapture in history or in a classroom". If it were not, perhaps we would have more than the scant documentation we have of the early stages of what became the Pitcairn language:

In spite of the vast number of books and articles that have been written about the Mutiny of the *Bounty* and the settlement of Pitcairn, the first 20 years of its history (1789 – 1809) the time when a new society and a new language jelled, are very poorly documented and short of some miracle such as the discovery of Edmund [sic – Edward] Young's diary, much will remain obscure. (Mühlhäusler 2011: 223)

Where Mühlhäusler presents the most detailed account to date of the influence of the Tahitian language specific to the modern Pitcairn language, the origins of language contact within Polynesia at the time of the *Bounty* is a much larger scale and complex affair. This work exists in parallel to Dreschel's (2014) detailing of the ontology and development of a pre-colonial Maritime Polynesian Pidgin (MPP), within which the influence of Tahitian is crucial. Dreschel agrees with Mühlhäusler in claiming that "[a]t the outset of their mutual encounter, members of the *Bounty* crew and their Polynesian consorts likely spoke MPP, as apparently corroborated by a short vocabulary of Tahitian by one of the mutineers Matthew Quintrel [sic]<sup>1</sup>." (Dreschel 2014: 52, referring to Ernst 1993: 30, 42).

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<sup>1</sup> Here Dreschel is obviously referring to *Bounty* mutineer Matthew Quintal.

So, within Dening's medley we have an established version of Bligh's bad language aimed entirely at his supposedly hedonistic and purported by-then culturally uninhibited staff. Here are the primitive origins of developing non-English forms of speech in what could be labelled an English-Polynesian desert or island beach community language (even if we are not yet on land), and the nascence of the Pitcairn language. There is tolerance somewhere on both sides, a give-and-take of concessions and outlays which resulted in differing outcomes: Bligh ended up with several of his crew in Timor some months after the mutiny; the mutinous crew were led into deeper languaged lands and seas.

The MPP sociolinguistic situation on board *Bounty* and on post-*Bounty* Pitcairn Island was desert island like; unlanded (shipped) and landed deserts of emergent language mixing. The Pitcairn Island language setting was and remained unusual compared to those of other contact languages which were expanding and maturing at the same time. During formative stages, the Pitcairn language was a linguistic recluse with no contact with any other varieties of MPP or other language input. What wordings *Bounty* brought stayed as long as those who made it to Pitcairn Island stayed alive.

Having now established and pinpointed the role of language in the domain of (the) *Bounty* and how it points directly towards the shift to Pitcairn and the resultant language, I wish to take a more detailed linguistic intermission. There are several matters regarding technicalities of language contact on Pitcairn Island which must be addressed as they concern *Bounty*. First, there is little to go on from the early stages of Pitcairn Island and what may have been spoken. University of Birmingham Professor A.S.C. Ross in 1964 did not seem overly hopeful about the future of Pitcairn language research nor indeed its past:

Thus the possibility of any serious linguistic work on the Island in the foreseeable future does seem rather remote, though more tape-recorded text is probably to be expected. Under the circumstances, then, it is, I think, correct to proceed solely on the basis of the material which A.W. [Moverley], Ross's by then late PhD student who had lived on Pitcairn in the late 1940s] collected so assiduously and so carefully. (The linguistic situation arising is thus not entirely dissimilar to that presented by a dead language with few texts, such as Shetlandic or Kassite.) Also, it is to be emphasised that, since the few jottings of earlier writers on Pitcairnese and Norfolkese are of little value, the present work is the first account of these languages. In the last analysis, any account of a language is better than no account at all. (Ross 1964: 10)

Here we see less Bligh's language and more the progression directed geographically and linguistically towards Pitcairn (language) and Pitcairn Island (place) through an incorporation and continual moulding of a Polynesian pidgin—a forced language and native of none, an anarchic cant, a way of speaking used to exclude others—as a statement of new self in developing new micro worlds. As to the pidgin(ised) nature of the evolving speech, indeed, at this point it was technically a pidgin and was pidginising and evolving. While it was not really a trade language or a language essential for anything beyond describing their common (recent) past and that which was to come, the language took shape, crystallised, and emerged into something which made and still make the Pitcairn Islanders different.

The initial British and Polynesians must have been conduit for what would eventually become larger vessels of linguistic priority. These peoples never shared a single common language. It was not a/the sole native of any to this day, except the possibility on Norfolk Island in the early 1900s where there was little English and only Norfolk spoken—Norfolk is the

Norfolk Island variety which developed after Pitcairn Island people and language were moved to Norfolk Island—in some of the households. It has never been the only language of the Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island communities because English has always existed in parallel. Most importantly, the language was a statement of delineation. Where Bligh used words and expressions like ‘vile man’, ‘damn you you lubber’, and ‘damn’d long pelt of a bitch’, Christian’s ‘mammoo!’ (silence) as a Tahitian linguistic interlude, seems to offer us much more as to the developing cross lingo of those who had just mutinied as opposed to the previous misdemeanours of their verbally aggressive and overambitious navigator.

In addition to language, there were ideas of colour, of which Denning reminds us:

The trouble was that the Pitcairners did not consider themselves ‘blacks’. Tahiti to them was a land of ‘blacks’. (Denning 1992: 336)

The narration Denning puts forward suggests that while the Pitcairners were perceived by the British to be special in British eyes, they were not elevated to being ‘whites’. Still, the language persisted and prospered, possibly with some more Tahitian input from this second and more precise interaction. Was the language black or white? Regarding the quote at the start of this essay, was it a language of the land or the sea? Was it English or Polynesian, male focused or female derived?

Here I must return to the task Denning set himself and contrast this with whatever the descriptive linguist and language philosopher might be hoping to achieve vis-à-vis working with Pitcairn Island and its language. Where the formal linguist is not able to describe that which is not there, Denning could take a great liberty and venture into the realm of surmising, conjecture, and guesswork. That is, telling us about language which was really never there. Denning offers few additions relating *Bounty*-speak to what was to burgeon on Pitcairn Island. In a similar manner to the way others have received some of Denning’s non-*Bounty* writings—“It [Denning’s 2004 *Beach Crossings*] has style, but substance is more notional, and subjectivity and relativity outweigh content and objectivity” (Laracy 2008: 872)—I must leave my own speculation for other domains. *Mr Bligh’s*, then, does not give that much to the ardent speculator nor should it necessarily.

Still, we have many Pitcairn Island toponyms (placenames). Their histories, their existence, their placement as membranous access points, and their often-humorous import offer much to the empirical scientist. To this, the linguist must be somewhat satisfied. And the *Bounty*-admirer remain be contented in the toponymic presence of The Ship’s and the Tahitian and Polynesian (cultural) entrance to the island’s social and linguistic landscape:

Time, space, language, culture, and memory converge and culminate somewhere and somehow on Pitcairn. Whatever is the case with the resultant spatial frame of reference which came about from language and cultural mixing, Tahiti made it to small Pitcairn. Although distant from Tahiti, on Pitcairn there is an almost otherworldly connection to Polynesia, one which implies the stretching of the bounds of time-space-culture and language contact. (Nash 2016: 7)

The only *Bounty* toponym on Pitcairn Island which remembers The Ship explicitly is *Bounty Bay*. From here we move into other less clear-cut *Bounty*-brought yet Polynesian originated toponymic memorabilia: Whanepupu, Hilatotara, Tatafei, Tautama, and Hulianda. These names punctuate the physical Pitcairn Island namescape and reinforce an already-documented rendition of Pitcairn language in place. Albert W. Moverley documented much about Pitcairn Island toponymy, as did Pacific historian Henry Maude. Other scholars, writers, and amateur cartographers have contributed to and furthered this work, an abstract and *Bounty*-fied Pitcairn

Island linguistic landscape. Maybe it is here a reified and re-presented *Bounty* in a toponym like *Bounty Bay* based in Denning's depictions of 'Mr Bligh's Bad Language' is made real. The brought-to-Pitcairn Island abstract *Bounty* is reinterpreted through Polynesian names and naming and the resultant mixing of language and names in Pitcairn linguistics is expanded in other reconstituted forms. For example, Timiti's Crack, Lemupool, Pulawana Bank, and Yahawli Stone comprise both Polynesian and English forms, realising this desert island panorama-made-named. These monikers partake in Tahitian language personal and biotic names, making a brief yet mixed thesis of interpretation of a variegated Euro-Polynesian topography.

In continuation of the tradition of Pitcairn Island toponymy and what input it has on our understanding of modern language and place relations as regards what *Mr Bligh's* embodies for such Pitcairn research, I, too, inhabited a type of 'wooded world' during my travel to Pitcairn Island. However, this time it was a metalled cave with appropriate board and lodging. There were more names gathered, the sentential syntax which has been much reshuffled since any language scholar had ever worked on Pitcairn Island, and a spoor of *Bounty* which has since become something beyond myth and legend. Where Bligh made it to Norfolk Island toponymically with Bligh Street and Bligh Court, I wonder if Mr Bligh's bad language—that he spoke, not that Denning wrote—can in any way be discerned on contemporary Pitcairn Island. Although Bligh was made to leave *Bounty*, I suspect more than a whiff of the captain and his notorious temperament remain embedded in thoughts and spoken forms on an island he most definitely never visited.

What is ultimately at task in a rejoinder of *Mr Bligh's* for a refocusing on the Pitcairn language is not so much what Bligh hurled at his officers, but what language they were developing in interaction with Tahiti and Greater Polynesia—the place and concept—and Tahitian(s), lack of article intended. Sure, the record goes that he was angry and spikey with words, to the extent that he could be considered unfriendly, a stalwart representative of the required nautical rigour of a captain (he was actually a commanding lieutenant at the time he left Portsmouth). His ambition and terseness were driven by self-determination and forward lookingness. No, our interest should lie more with the snippets Denning provides about cultural contact, scarred skin, and worded breaching, of skewed language precipitates and cockleshells. For this more abstract task, I pose Denning as capable an academic helmsman as Bligh and indeed Christian were as maritime commanders.

As I have attempted to lead the reader, I myself have been led and drawn towards a rethinking of Denning's *Mr Bligh's*. Within the theatrics and performance of what Pitcairn Island and the Pitcairn language offer the linguist, I am invited into another act, further narratives upon the stage of *Bounty* and its assemblage of possibilities. One would hope the language(s) and honorifics which avail and abound would lead to fewer derisive outcomes than what occurred between Bligh and his men. I claim Professor Denning would also wish no less of the avid seeker–writer–reader:

We have to liberate the creative reader, I say. Stir the exegete, make the critic, let them hear the global discourse that is the white noise behind all our disciplines. What tricks do we have for that? Aphorisms? Riddles? Perspectives of Incongruity? Metaphors? All of those. Our readers need to be rid of their fear of flying. They will not lose theirs if they catch ours. (Denning 2000: no pagination)

### **Leaving Matters**

In summary I consider what I may have contributed to our comprehension and appreciation of 'the language of (the) *Bounty*'. I have reconsidered a rhetorical and figurative expression of *Bounty* more than two decades after Denning coined the historical and arguably factual expression 'Mr Bligh's bad language' and solidified the need for further language research into the open domains laid bare by the late historian. In so doing, our language based consideration of the history, the mutiny, *Bounty*, and Pitcairn Island have been reignited:

That debate of why there was a mutiny on the *Bounty* has been long. Who can – who would want to – end it? Not I. I am a coward for causes but a professor of parables. ... How can I not be the product of my times? Look to Mr Bligh's bad language, I say, and all that that may mean. Our lives are a double helix of past and present. We are the language of our representations. We are caught in our webs of significance. (Denning 1992: 8–9)

Among these 'webs of significance' belie oversimplistic claims-cum-untruths: Pitcairn is a prototypical creole; Pitcairn is a mix of English and Tahitian; the Pitcairn and Norfolk languages are the same and can be coupled as 'Pitcairn-Norfolk' with no necessary consideration of whether the languages are the same or not. Where Denning left few ethnohistorical stones unturned, many yet remain: how vast was the influence of St Kitts Creole of *Bounty* midshipman Edward Young, a person of mixed race from the Caribbean? What Polynesian and Caribbean linguistic effects influenced the languages and grammars of space on tiny Pitcairn Island and in the resultant Norfolk language, especially after and through the estrangement from Europe, the Caribbean, Polynesia, and more specifically, Tahiti. We should remind ourselves of the etymology of this fabled land in our *Bounty* tale:

'Tahiti' is, in different forms, the Polynesian word for a distant place. (Denning 1992: 160)

My future work involves a fusion of time-space, *Bounty*-non-*Bounty*, land-sea, knowledge-the unknowable, scholarship-practice, pilgrimage-sedentariness, Denning-other. It must be within these bounds of contradiction that a more thorough and lavish exegesis of *Bounty* and Pitcairn (Island) can be accomplished. The prognosis for success at the moment appears to be favourable, as were the seas (mostly) during my 2016 voyage.

I end my piece in a similar way to my opening: with an acknowledgement, to wit Denning's acknowledgement. Where I implicitly thanked Denning for bringing (the) *Bounty* to me through the auspices of language study and for a realisation of the reality of Pitcairn Island linguistics and a possible linguistics of The Ship itself and its human and non-human contents, I wish to thank him explicitly through his own salute of the boat-which-made-him.

The *Bounty* has been bountiful to me. I cannot say who gave her the name or whether there was any discussion of its aptness to the ambitions that sent her into the Pacific to deliver a source of mass subsistence, the breadfruit, to West Indies slave plantations. But the hours of enjoyment, the years of learning have been a bounty for me. The *Bounty* is my first acknowledgement. (Denning 1992: xi)

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