

## Voyages of Discovery in the 18th Century

At the beginning of the 18th century little was known about the area that we now call the Pacific. Although, prior to this time, explorers such as Drake, Tasman and Magellan had crossed the Pacific, it was still thought that there existed some great land mass, possibly the size of Europe or even larger that was waiting to be discovered. This supposed continent offered immense possibilities for trade and colonisation. It was only during the century that slowly it became obvious that no such land mass existed and that, apart from Australia and New Zealand, the South Seas contained nothing but thousands of small islands.

Apart from the great southern continent, the other great geographical myths that existed involved not the South Seas but the far north of the globe. It was still thought that America and Russia were joined together. When this was disproved there was still current the idea that it was possible to sail from the Atlantic to the Pacific via what became known as the North-West Passage. It was thought that above Canada there was a sea route which, in the summer months was open to shipping. It was merely a matter of finding it.

Discovery of the North-West Passage and the southern continent presented great economic possibilities for whichever nation could discover and exploit them, and such an attraction proved impossible for the British government to resist, so that in the later part of the eighteenth century, expeditions were sent in the hope of discovering these two geographical dreams.

The first of these expeditions was sent out in 1764 under the command of John Byron, but achieved little. The second, under Samuel Wallis made a discovery which is pertinent to the story of the "Bounty". On the 23rd June, 1767, Wallis discovered an island which he first named King George's Island, a name which was soon changed to the native name of Otaheite or Tahiti. During his stay there Wallis established friendly relations with the natives which were developed even more by the next English visitor to the island. This was to be Captain James Cook.

Neither of these first two voyages had completely disproved the idea of a southern continent. It was to be Cook's three voyages between 1768 and 1779 that finally removed all hopes of a great land mass in the South Seas. On the first of these voyages, Cook charted the whole of New Zealand, disproving that it was part of a great continent, then sailed on to New Holland (or what is now called Australia). Although there was still not enough evidence to remove the possibility of the southern continent, this voyage proved that it had to be further south. On his second voyage he went to the Antarctic circle but was forced back by

# The Bounty

BACKGROUND NOTES FOR SCHOOLS



pack ice. On a second attempt he came within a thousand miles of the South Pole but was again forced back. At last, Cook gave up the idea of the Great Southern Continent and concluded that the Antarctic was all that was to be found in those southern waters.

His third (and fatal) voyage was in search of that other myth - the North West Passage. One myth had been disposed of but the other remained. This third voyage has its links with the story of the "Bounty" for sailing aboard Cook's ship the "Resolution" as ship's master was William Bligh. More Pacific islands were discovered (including the Hawaiian Islands) but the search for the North West Passage had to be called off due to the onset of winter and the damage to one of Cook's two ships. Returning to Hawaii trouble arose between the natives and Cook's expedition. It was here that Cook was killed. Although dead, his memory lingered on in the islands that he had visited. "Toote", as he was known, was looked on as a sort of god. He was held in such high esteem that Bligh, on his ill-fated trip to Tahiti, lied to the islanders in order to be welcomed as a friend of Cook, saying that he was still alive.

It was due to Cook's voyages that the knowledge of the Pacific expanded. Much was still to be discovered, but one myth about the world had been dismissed.

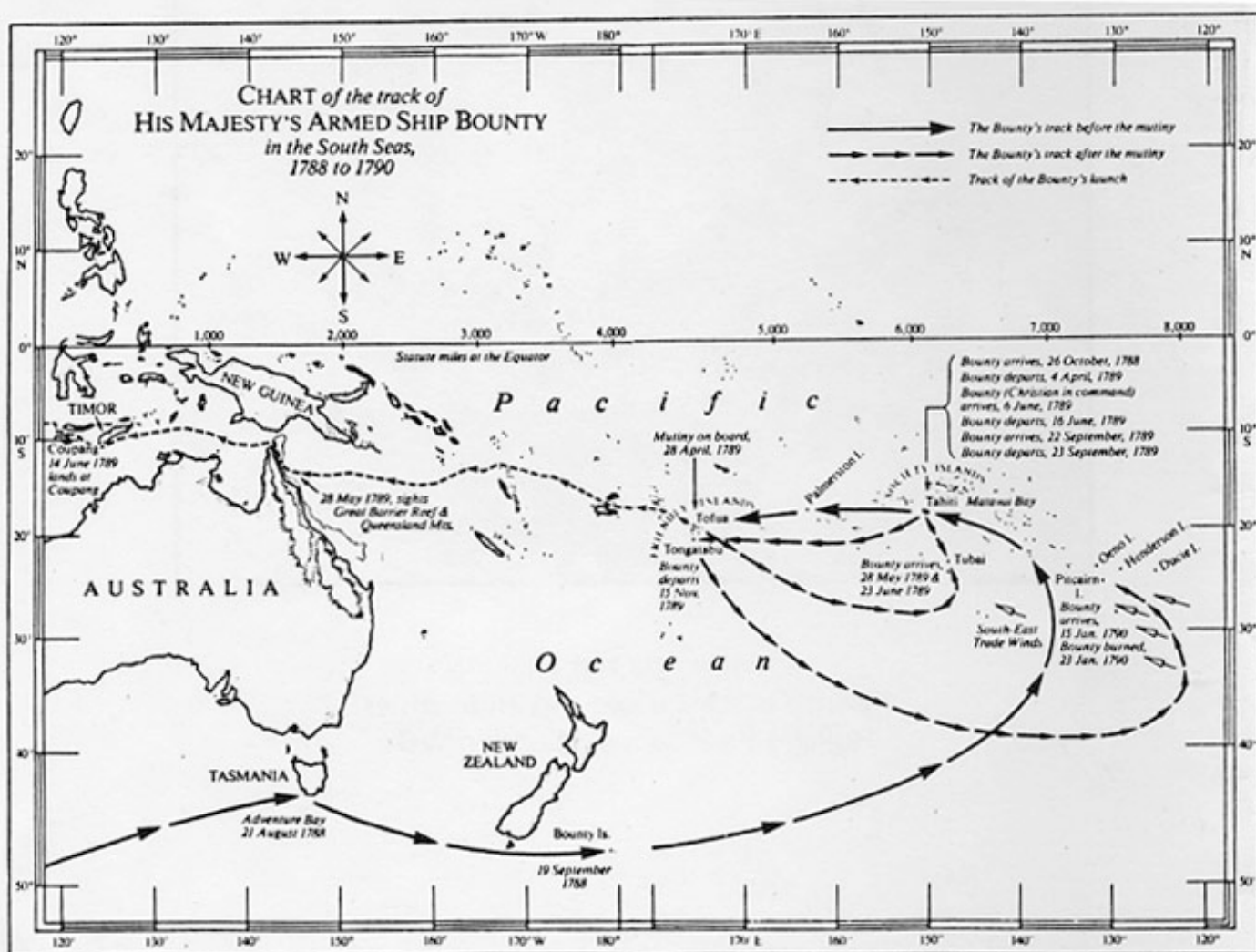


CHART of the track of  
HIS MAJESTY'S ARMED SHIP BOUNTY  
in the South Seas, 1788 to 1790

## Life in the Navy in the 18th Century

Dr. Johnson, the famous eighteenth century writer, once wrote of life in the navy of the time - "No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get him in jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned". Considering that this was the period when the infamous Newgate Prison was in use, Johnson's condemnation of the navy was strong indeed.

Although there were quite a number of volunteers in the navy, the majority of sailors were obtained by legal compulsion. Judges would sentence criminals to serve in the navy rather than go to prison. Others were forced to join by the infamous "press gang" - men were simply snatched from the streets and taverns by a lieutenant and a group of trusted sailors. If caught by a "press gang", a man was entitled to be released if he could prove he was not a seaman. Usually, the "proof" was not examined until the ship was at sea - too late to be of any use. No consideration was given as to whether the man had a family or not. Impressment was not the only hardship, however. Once aboard ship conditions could be called squalid at best. Although the officers lived reasonably well, with wine, cabins and reasonable food, the sailors were confined to a dark and damp galley below decks which served as sleeping and eating quarters. Either hammocks or tables were hung from the beams depending on the time of day. With thirty or more men cramped in confined areas it is hardly surprising that fights broke out considering the conditions and the backgrounds of many of the men.

The men's daily rations of a gallon of beer, a pound of ship's biscuit, a pound of meat, some cheese, oatmeal and peas might seem sufficient. It was rare, however, that they received all that they should. All too often the ship's purser would have spirited away some of the better quality food or would have made a deal with the supplier so that less food than was ordered came aboard and the profit made from the remaining food was split between them. Even with their rations reduced what they received was often uneatable. This was before canning and refrigeration and so food rotted quickly. Ship's biscuits would often be mouldy and full of maggots, the salted meat almost impossible to swallow. Casks of food, when opened, would be found to be so rotten that they had to be thrown over the side. The men simply had less to eat. Because of the poor food and the bad conditions disease and sickness were rife.

On long voyages, scurvy was one of the most dangerous. Few captains realised how important it was to have fresh food to combat this killer disease, which was caused by a lack of vitamins. Scurvy was not the only danger - typhus, smallpox, typhoid, yellow fever and malaria were rife in the ships of the navy.

If trouble did arise, then punishment was severe. The most prevalent punishment was flogging. Depending on how severe the crime was, the Captain would sentence a number of lashes of the cat o'nine tails. The number of strokes ranged from one to a hundred and there were no set number for particular crimes. It all depended on the whim of the captain.

With such harsh conditions it is hardly surprising that desertion and mutiny occurred, culminating in the Spithead Mutiny of 1797 when the North Sea Fleet turned against its officers in a demand for better conditions. It is ironic that one of the ships that mutinied was H.M.S. Director whose captain was William Bligh.

## "The Bounty"

The ship that was selected for Bligh's voyage to Tahiti was the "Bethia", a merchantman, which was overhauled and renamed "Bounty". In order for the breadfruit plants to be safely transported, a miniature "greenhouse" was created at the stern of the ship. Wide shelves were erected into which the pots containing the plants would be slotted. Due to the amount of space that the plants would take up, space for the crew was even more confined than normal. As the crew had to be small in number, Bligh was unable to take with him a squad of Marines. These soldiers usually acted as a kind of police force aboard a ship and an army when on shore. Bligh was thus deprived of a force which could have controlled his sailors.

The voyage began, therefore, in a small, cramped ship, 84 feet long and 26 feet wide.

## The Voyage of "The Bounty"

On the 23rd December, 1787 the "Bounty", under the command of Lieutenant William Bligh, set sail from England for Tahiti. The objective of the voyage was to collect breadfruit plants from Tahiti and transport them to the West Indies. The plantation owners in Jamaica and St. Vincent thought that they could grow the breadfruit on their plantations and use the produce to feed the slaves who worked for them. This would save the owners money as they would not have to pay for food.

In order to make the voyage as short as possible, Bligh intended to go to Tahiti via Cape Horn at the tip of South America but storms could blow up suddenly around Cape Horn making it dangerous for ships which could be forced onto the rocks or simply engulfed by 40 foot waves. The "Bounty's" voyage to the Cape was uneventful and on arriving in the vicinity all seemed to bode well. But storms suddenly blew up and although Bligh spent from March to April trying to round the Horn, he was eventually defeated and had to turn back to the Cape of Good Hope and take the route that he had been trying to avoid. It was not, therefore, until the October of 1788 that the "Bounty" arrived at Tahiti almost a year after it had left England.

The sailors settled down for a six month stay in this South Sea's paradise - a paradise for them considering the background from which they came. They were welcomed by the islanders and treated royally. As the ship departed from Tahiti in April of 1789 it was understandable that many of the crew were unhappy - they were leaving behind girlfriends and an idyllic way of life. Before them was a long voyage, poor food and a homecoming which would contrast wildly with the reception that they had been given in Tahiti.

Problems began to arise almost immediately. Bligh used the only punishment available to him - flogging - to discipline his men, and this harsh treatment gradually alienated him not only from the men but from the officers as well. On the 28th April some of the crew, under the leadership of Fletcher Christian mutinied. Bligh and 18 members of the crew were cast adrift in an open boat.

Bligh's navigation of this boat on a journey of over 3,000 miles to Timor, must rate as one of the greatest achievements ever for a sailor. None of the men died, although they lived for many weeks on a few ounces of meat and a small amount of water per day. The men were in the boat for nearly eight weeks, stopping only on a couple of islands off the coast of Australia. That they all survived is a miracle; that Bligh managed to navigate that distance with no charts and limited navigational equipment was an amazing feat of seamanship, showing the skill that Bligh had as a navigator. Yet this excellence is offset by the way that he treated his crew, a crew that eventually mutinied under his command.

## Tahiti and its Islanders

Because most early accounts of the discovering of new lands were passed on simply by the white, Western discoverers, the images that formed in the minds of people in Europe of the inhabitants of the rest of the world tended to reflect a sense of superiority which still remains in the 20th century in its most dangerous form - racism. In the 18th century these newly "discovered" people were at various times referred to as savages (sometimes, if they were friendly, "noble" savages), childlike, idiotic; the Europeans who sailed in the Pacific saw, from their supposed "civilised" outlook, a way of life which, although attractive in its easy going way, was often regarded as immoral and idle.

The attraction of Tahiti was obvious. It was a fertile island which has a continuous summer -the epitome of what we refer to as a "South Sea Island". Yet it was in no way "savage". The Polynesians who inhabited the island were part of a culture which spread across much of the Pacific, sharing the same language and the same basic religious beliefs and having a society which was based on these beliefs.

The Tahitians believed that the universe was created by the God Ta'aroa who also created other gods. These gods, the "atua" were the positive creative gods. These gods were worshipped in open air temples and the rites were conducted by priests who had been trained in special schools. Within Tahitian society the chiefs, the overall rulers, were considered to be closest to the gods. Beneath them were the ra'atira, the middle classes who controlled all of the commoners who did the work and provided services to the other two classes. In many ways, with its three social classes, Tahitian society was little different to the British society that Cook and Bligh had left.

Land was divided between chiefs and was the cause of many bloody conflicts. Fierce battles were fought, the most important at sea. These battles were brutal affairs. The defeated were chased and killed without mercy and their women and children were slaughtered. Lands captured were often laid waste.

Behind this cruelty, however, was an everyday life which must have seemed idyllic to the men from Europe. The tahitians did not live in villages but in scattered homesteads. The houses were made of wood, with thatched roofs. Furniture was simple - mainly mats to sleep and sit on. Pottery and metal were unknown on the islands and so most implements were made of wood or stone. The Tahitians lived by farming and fishing and because the climate was so good, farming was not a difficult occupation. The islanders would work in the morning and then rest in the heat of the afternoon. Their staple food was the breadfruit although yams, sugar cane and sweet potatoes were also grown. The only domesticated animals on the island were pigs, fowls and dogs, all of which were bred to be killed and eaten.

One thing that Captain Cook noted in his visits to the island was the cleanliness of the people. The clothing that they wore was never washed once it became dirty it was thrown away and new clothes were worn. Something that must have been strange to the Europeans was that there was little or no privacy on the island. Marriage was not regarded as permanent and the islanders were free from the type of sexual morality that existed in England. So the culture that existed in Tahiti was in many ways similar to the civilised Europe of the discovering voyagers. The obvious differences, however, can be seen to be an attraction for men of a poor background who had been on board a ship for many months.

## The Mutineers

The film "The Bounty" ends with Fletcher Christian and some of his fellow mutineers burning the "Bounty" having arrived at Pitcairn Island. Yet he had with him only 8 of the 25 men who had remained on the "Bounty" after the mutiny.

The other 16 sailors had remained at Tahiti, some hoping to be picked up by a British ship, others living in fear of this event. It was two years after the mutiny that H.M.S. Pandora arrived at Tahiti in search of the "Bounty" mutineers. By this time two of the sailors were already dead - Churchill and Thompson. Churchill had been murdered by Thompson who in turn was killed in revenge by Churchill's Tahitian friends. The fourteen remaining sailors were arrested, some pleading innocence, and were incarcerated in a specially constructed prison "box" on the Pandora. The ship then sailed from island to island, searching for Fletcher Christian and the remaining mutineers without success. On the return journey to England, however, the "Pandora" was wrecked off the coast of Australia. Four of the "Bounty" mutineers were drowned. The survivors of the wreck took to the boats and sailed on to Timor in what was a repeat of Bligh's epic voyage. By a cruel twist of fate, two of the survivors, Hayward and Hallet were officers of the "Bounty" who had been with Bligh on the voyage in the "Bounty's" launch. They had been sent on the "Pandora" in order to identify the mutineers. So, having survived one gruelling journey in an open boat, they were forced to undergo a second experience of the same kind.

The remaining ten men of the "Bounty" eventually arrived at Spithead in June 1792. A trial followed almost immediately. In October three and a half years after the mutiny, 3 of the mutineers were hanged Ellison, Millward and Burkett. One was imprisoned and six were pardoned. But what of Fletcher Christian and his fellow mutineers on Pitcairn Island?

Nothing was heard of them until 1808, nearly twenty years after the mutiny. An American whaler, the "Topaz", arrived at the island to discover Jack Adams (known as Alexander Smith aboard the "Bounty") as the sole survivor of the mutineers who had landed with Christian in December 1789. The story that Adams told the captain of the "Topaz" was one of murder and mistrust. Four years after their landing at Pitcairn Christian and four other mutineers had been murdered by the Tahitian men after a quarrel over the women. Later that same year the remaining mutineers had killed all the Tahitian men. Two others died violent deaths in the following years. Only Edward Young, Christian's midshipman friend who had urged him to lead the mutiny, died by natural causes in 1800.

It was not until 1825 that a British ship arrived at Pitcairn to take a statement from Adams, by that time probably the last survivor of the crew who had set out from Spithead on December 23rd 1787 aboard H.M.S. "Bounty".

## Suggestions for Work

Work arising from the film falls into four areas:- around the "Bounty" itself, work around Captain Cook, work based on British colonial expansion during the 18th century and finally a close look at British society at the time of the "Bounty" voyage.

Some of the books listed below might be of use both to teachers and students.

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## Relevant Exhibits for "THE BOUNTY" that can be seen at the NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

### The Navigation Gallery

A small display explaining the Mutiny and Bligh's use of one of the first Marine Chronometers. Maps, personal effects, paintings and photographs make up the display. Close by is a chart drawn by Captain Cook and a small display about Mathew Flinders; both these people sailed with Bligh. Bligh was master of the "Resolution" during Cook's last voyage to the Pacific Ocean. Mathew Flinders was a midshipman to Bligh on the "Providence" which Bligh commanded on the second 'Breadfruit' voyage in 1792.

### Captain Cook Galleries

To get some idea of life amongst the Pacific Islands and conditions onboard ship during the time of Bligh, visit the Capt. Cook gallery. This gallery has paintings of the Pacific Islands, some of which deal directly with Tahiti.

### The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars

#### The North Sea 1793-1801 Gallery

This gallery contains paintings showing the Battle of Camperdown fought by Admiral Duncan on 11th October 1797 in which Bligh played a distinguished part as Captain of the "Director".

#### Nelson Gallery

Paintings showing Nelson's victory at the Battle of Copenhagen fought on 2nd April 1801. Bligh was Captain of the "Glatton" during this battle.