be relevant to those looking at similar issues in other geographical regions as a point of comparison. Rich in ethnographic detail, the often creative avenues through which the common concerns of individuality, morality and responsibility are addressed make for engaging reading.


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William Bligh is perhaps the most misunderstood of the early Pacific explorers and colonisers. In her new book, Bligh: William Bligh in the South Seas, Anne Salmond brings a fresh perspective to a well documented topic. The book’s 23 chapters trace Bligh’s three voyages to the Pacific Islands: the first on board Resolution with Cook in 1776-80, then Bounty in 1787-90 and the third aboard Providence in 1791-93. Salmond said the book “tumbled out” of the end of The Trial of the Cannibal Dog (Radio New Zealand, 10 September 2011) which frames the story in terms of cultural awareness. Bligh however, seeks to “illuminate the island world, its key players and their relationships with Bligh so often peripheral to existing texts” (p. 21). Why? Because “[t]he Pacific protagonists were as real as their British counterparts, helping to share and shape what happened in both places” (p. 21). This line of argument informs the entire book.

The opening chapters remind the reader that these voyages, inspired by patrons like Joseph Banks, fostered both ecological imperialism and commercial enterprise. From 1765 to 1793 fifteen British naval vessels came into the central Pacific for purposes of discovery and appropriation, or, like the Bounty and Providence, for purposes of exploitation. By the time of Bligh’s first visit in 1777 Tahiti “was no untouched Utopia…. the Islanders had acquired not only guns, muskets, iron tools and strange clothing but also venereal and epidemic diseases” (p. 69). Salmond reflects these cross-cultural impacts in early chapter titles, Chapters 1: The Paradise of the World and 3: Island of the Blest, then cynically in Chapters 19: This Modern Cyprus and 21: Paradise Lost. By his third voyage Bligh laments, “they are so generally altered, that I believe no European in future will ever know what their ancient Customs of Receiving Strangers were” (p. 358).

Like Cook, Bligh was initiated into the royal circles of Tahitian society and took a deep interest in local customs and beliefs. He was not only a practical seaman and hydrographer, but a pioneering ethnographer who made major contributions to our knowledge of life in Polynesia during the early contact period (p. 14). Three chapters, 8: Bligh/Parai, 10: These Happy Islanders and 20: Belle of the Isle, provide vivid details of the island world including topics like child-bearing, theology and food preparation methods. Calendrical events, such as the “season of plenty”, Pleiades (matari ‘i), and the many ‘entertainments’ (heiva), sacred ‘arioi performances, fertility
rituals and sacrifices are described, as is the Tahitian practice of taking ‘bond friends’ (taio). In this relationship each party was obliged to share knowledge and Salmond notes, “as Bligh’s understanding of the language became more fluent and subtle, his reports grew more accurate and insightful” (p. 169). Similarly, the Tahitians were exposed to and intensely curious about the European world. Following a long-established pattern in Pacific Studies of combining history and anthropology, Salmond is careful to bring historical depth to these accounts.

Bligh’s log, journal and charts from Cook’s third voyage are all missing, gone with the Bounty. This missing documentation requires Salmond take a “forensic approach, reconstructing his activities from fragmentary traces” (p. 48). What emerges is a generous, genial patron, a mentor with a care and concern for his crew not often displayed by other commanders. But Bligh could also turn into an overbearing, vitriolic bully, especially to those who failed to live up to his exacting standards. Bligh lacked the charisma and stature of Cook, but ironically upon the arrival of the Bounty in Tahiti he claimed to be Cook’s son. Salmond describes Bligh as an insecure man, prone to elaborate feats of self-justification. Paradoxical traits continually plagued his career and his reputation as a tyrant and bully is often blamed for causing the Bounty mutiny. But Bligh could readily become “warm and engaging” and was “ardent and faithful” (p. 442) to his wife Betsy. The text offers up rich contrasts of tender domestic life, revealed in the unguarded letters between husband and wife. Salmond describes their marriage as “a love match that would survive the triumphs and disasters of Bligh’s turbulent career” (p. 101). Yet a sense of betrayal permeates Bligh’s character. Unjustly treated after Cook’s death, he received neither recognition nor reward for his work on Resolution. He felt betrayed by his protégé, mutineer Fletcher Christian, and upon his return to England following the Providence voyage he found public opinion had rallied against him, fuelled by a discrediting “war of the pamphlets” instigated by influential families of mutineers Christian and Heywood. Bligh’s career was plagued with battles both on land and sea.

Over the span of more than a dozen years, Tahiti remains the sensual and exotic backdrop to the book’s narrative. Perhaps Bligh never forgave Tahiti for the mutiny; he was quick to blame the island’s seductive women for leading his men astray. The mutiny is one of the most documented events in naval history and retains a mythical quality, (re)presented in hundreds of books and even three major Hollywood movies. The Bounty voyage features prominently from Chapters 5 through 17. Chapter 11: Huzza for Otaheiti! revisits the mutiny while Chapter 12: I have Been Run Down by My Own Dogs charts Bligh’s 3618 mile voyage to the East Indies after the mutiny. Drawing on the works of Owen Rutter, Salmond uses Bligh’s journal to describe this incredible journey by open boat. Amidst deprivation, cold and misery, Bligh not only charts, records and reflects; he instils faith and a sense of hope in the men under his care. Having exonerated himself from all blame, Bligh felt “an inward happiness which prevented any depression of my spirits…. I found my mind wonderfully supported” (p. 216). Chapters 17: The Mutineer’s Babies and 22: The Awful Day of Trial introduce new perspectives of events post mutiny. The Epilogue gives an account of the early Pitcairn settlement by nine mutineers and their Tahitian taio. However, some details of this account differ with established literature regarding the sequence of deaths of all but one mutineer, John Adams.
Extensively researched, using a broad selection of primary sources and richly illustrated with 25 colour plates and scores of black and white illustrations, Bligh successfully combines historical and anthropological perspectives. Accessible and easy to read, the book is written with a sensitive style and nuanced (at times speculative) perspective about how to represent the past. Salmond remains true to her intention to illuminate the island world with comprehensive descriptions of Polynesian words, customs, beliefs and practice that may prove too detailed for some readers. Bligh is a book that will have wide appeal and a worthy addition to Salmond’s award-winning repertoire.


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Gunter Senft is an Austronesian language specialist well known for his many years of working and living with the people of the Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea, learning and researching the language of Kilivila. He first visited Tauwema, a village on Kaile‘una Island, in 1982, and has maintained a relationship with the people there since. Thus a book by Senft devoted to a particular performance practice of Trobriand Islanders is something to anticipate, as it promises rich ethnography and a depth of detail and understanding.

In this slim and handsomely-presented book (volume 5 in a series published by Benjamins entitled Culture and Language Use: Studies in Anthropological Linguistics), Senft shines his light on death in the Trobriand Islands. His focus is on Islanders’ traditional belief system regarding the spirit world and how this belief system is expressed through performance, particularly song language.

The book is arranged into four chapters, preceded by some very useful maps and a brief introduction. His skill at ethnographic writing, displayed at the outset, will be particularly valuable for readers who have little knowledge of ritual life in Papua New Guinea (since the book lacks photographs that might otherwise illustrate these scenes). Chapter 1, which is a short (13 page) introduction to mortuary ritual and belief in the Trobriand Islands, introduces the reader to the concept of the baloma, the spirit of the deceased. From this first chapter the reader new to the subject matter will realise that Senft’s writing draws heavily on research that has gone before, most notably that of Malinowski, perhaps the most famous researcher to work in the Trobriand Islands. Senft’s reading and re-reading of Malinowski’s work is a cornerstone of this book.

Chapter 2 is a longer chapter describing in more detail the journey of the baloma after death, the underworld into which the baloma enters, and the interaction of baloma with their former real-world lives, with some comparative notes on similar