

## Serpent in Paradise

Well, I'll admit right up front that your chances of ever finding a matchcover from Pitcairn Island are nil, seeing as there are only 38 people on the island and there's no economy, *but* you will run across covers from time to time that reference the H.M.S. Bounty, such as the one pictured here. Thus, sharing my love of history, you will undoubtedly want to know the story behind such references... I know what you're thinking... *'I saw the movie; I know the story!'* Humbug! I say! Hollywood made a great movie, but the facts point in a different direction. Fletcher Christian was no Clark Gable, and Capt. Bligh was no Charles Laughton. It's been two centuries, five movies, and 2,500 books and articles since Christian led a mutiny on H.M.S. Bounty on April 28, 1789, and the controversy continues. Here are the facts...

While cruising the South Pacific, Christian and some of the crew of the "Bounty" mutinied against Capt. William Bligh, rebelling against what they said was his inhuman treatment of the crew, which may or may not have been true, but keep in mind that this was 1789; keelhauling, flogging, etc. of crew members was not uncommon in the British Navy at the time. Anyway, Christian took over the ship and set Bligh, along with 18 others, adrift in the largest ocean in the world (the fact that half the crew elected to side with the Captain, even under such dire circumstances, seems to be a point in Bligh's favor). The mutineers then sailed the "Bounty" to Tahiti, where sixteen of the less intelligent ones had a splendid time until a British warship arrived. They were all arrested, and three were eventually hanged. By then, however, Christian and the other mutineers had sailed off in the "Bounty" with some Tahitian men and women in search of a safer haven. After four months, Christian and his men found the most isolated island in the world—Pitcairn. In the meantime, Bligh, with no charts, little food, and only a 23-foot boat, had crossed 3,900 miles of open ocean to land safely on Timor.

Pitcairn could have been a paradise, but the mutineers turned it into a Hell. Within ten years, all of the Tahitian men and all but one of the English, including Christian, were dead, most of them murdered (a point against the mutineers). By the time a Boston sea captain stumbled upon the colony, only John Adams was alive of all the men, and the violence had subsided...*subsided*, but not ended.

Today, there are 38 people on Pitcairn, all descended from the 27 who arrived on the "Bounty" in 1790. They speak a blend of English and Polynesian known as "Pitkern"—and they aren't very happy. Detective Superintendent Dennis McGookin visited the island (still a British colony) in 1996 to investigate a rape case, "but when he got there it turned into numerous incidents. There's alcohol-related crime and violent crime and...there are more guns on the island than anybody needs." In fact, McGookin was so shocked by the behavior of the inhabitants that he recommended that the island be abandoned "if the residents didn't pull their socks up." Instead, the British government is now spending \$50,000 a year to station a policeman there for 6-8 weeks annually. This may or may not help, but one

does get the vague feeling that perhaps Bligh wasn't so bad after all.

Bligh, by the way, in an age when Royal Navy captains who lost their ships to mutiny were invariably cashiered, not only stayed in the navy, but served with distinction in the Napoleonic Wars and rose to the rank of admiral.

[based on 6/14/98 article, *Sacramento Bee*]

