

## Positioning the Pitcairn Islands<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This note both introduces a cluster of articles on the Pitcairn Islands and unpacks the current climate of urgency around recording, and protecting, the distinctive features of Pitcairn Island's language, lore and folklife, due to a rapidly declining population and currently faltering repopulation efforts.

**KEYWORDS:** Pitcairn Islands, national identity, repopulation

The Pitcairn Islands, which feature four volcanic islands and a total land mass of 47 square kilometres, in the remote South Pacific, are one of the most remote locations on Earth. Of the four islands, only Pitcairn is inhabited—with the main settlement being Adamstown, the world's smallest capital. Adamstown is located atop the Hill of Difficulty, near Bounty Bay, and is little more than a spread-out village by international standards. In 2014 the official population of Pitcairn was 49 people—giving the island a 'small and aging population base'.<sup>2</sup> Further emphasizing the location's isolation, Pitcairn has no airstrip for fixed wing aircraft, and, is out-of-range for land-based rotary wing aircraft. Therefore, Pitcairn can only be accessed by boat, and in most cases, several weeks may pass between boats visiting the island. Various media reports have noted that mail reaches Pitcairn with less speed today than it often did during the nineteenth-century's days of sailing ships. While that isolation is a limiting factor in many respects, it has fostered the development of a rich and unique body of island lore, dialectical language, and folklife.

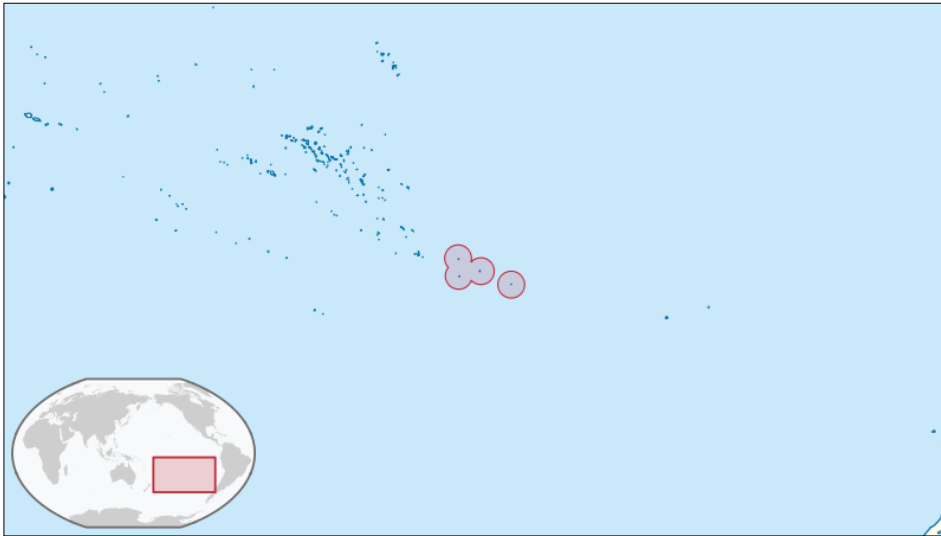
Even though early Polynesian peoples had visited, and constructed monuments, upon Pitcairn Island,<sup>3</sup> it was not continuously settled until 1790, when the mutineers of the *Bounty*—commanded by Fletcher Christian, together with a group of Polynesians, arrived. Consequently, the maritime lore of the *Bounty* mutiny, and more generally South Pacific shipping and exploration, as well as the unique social process operating

<sup>1</sup> This short comment, originally intended as a prelude to Joshua Nash's note: *Is (the possibility of) unemployment a crime?*, provides an introduction to the cluster of studies on the lore and traditions of Pitcairn Island in *Australian Folklore* 31 (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Rob Solomon, and Kirsty Burnett, *Pitcairn Island Economic Review* (Wellington, New Zealand: Solomon Leonard Ltd, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> While exploring the island the 1790 party found 'many temple platforms (*marae*) with small carved stone images of typical Polynesian style'. Kirch (1988), p. 27. The island had however been abandoned long before they arrived.

behind the island's history of miscegenation and cultural blending—between Western and Polynesian stock—still form a strong basis for the heritage and identity of Pitcairn and her population today.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Pitcairn Islands.<sup>4</sup>

To this day, the most influential study of Pitcairn, and Pitcairnese, particularly to Folklorists, remains Alan S.C. Ross' *The Pitcairnese Language*, which was published as part of 'The Language Library' series by Andre Deutsch in 1964. That text held a special place in shifting the intersections of linguistics and folklore with regards to the study of contemporary phenomenon. Notably, the volume was also widely read at Balliol College (a constituent college of the University of Oxford that was founded in 1263), and, per John S. Ryan, right across the language and lore-focused students and dons of Oxford, being well known to a range of influential folklore and language thinkers—including both J.R.R. Tolkien and himself.<sup>5</sup>

In 2004 Pitcairn sprang to international media prominence, due to numerous court proceedings for endemic sexual crimes<sup>6</sup>—with initially seven male residents being charged with 55 offences (including the Mayor,

<sup>4</sup> Map from Wikimedia Commons and used under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 licence.

<sup>5</sup> This was noted in a personal communication.

<sup>6</sup> Fletcher, Lisa, 'Reading the News: Pitcairn Island at the Beginning of the 21st Century', *Island Studies Journal*, 3 (2008), 57-72, <http://www.islandstudies.ca/sites/islandstudies.ca/files/ISJ-3-1-2008-Fletcher-FINAL.pdf>

Steve Christian). Given the total population of Pitcairn, this represented a third of the males on the island—and six of those seven men were convicted of crimes including 'girls [as young as 7 being ...] taken into [...] banana groves, pinned down and raped, sometimes by more than one man'.<sup>7</sup> Stressing the gravity of the situation on Pitcairn, during the trials 'both perpetrators and victims described this sexual "breaking in" as normal'.<sup>8</sup> Further cases unfolded over the following three years. The wake of the trials not only left Pitcairn Islanders with a deep sense of grief and shame, but also social divisions, and, a globally tarnished reputation—arguably beyond any hope of short-term repair.

Presently the island is seeking to increase immigration, having established an 'Immigration and Repopulation' website <<http://www.immigration.gov.pn/>> which has received some smaller levels of global media attention. Press reports, particularly in the United Kingdom, tend to highlight the global reluctance of people to relocate to the island, out rightly stating that 'no-one can be persuaded to live there, for love nor money'.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, in addition to the island's isolation, that reluctance is probably due to the history of child sexual abuse which has become a dominant unit within globally negotiated and understood identity narratives surrounding the island.

Flowing from that situation, Pitcairn's rapidly declining population, coupled with the crisis of low (or no) immigration to the island, has left the media discussing the possible scenario that Pitcairn may soon be abandoned—as repopulation from current stock may not even be possible due to the low number of women on the island 'capable of pregnancy' (which is reported to be between 1 and 3)<sup>10</sup>—a fate also hinted at by Solomon in his official report on the island's future.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, not only is the local language dialect now recognized as endangered by many scholars, but Pitcairn folklore and folklife are also endangered—with real threat of those aspects of the dominion's cultural trove being lost as living-lore, and as yet unrecorded aspects at threat of remaining overlooked among the recorded history of the Commonwealth if not soon noted during the visits of cultural researchers. Consequently, the lore of Pitcairn has

<sup>7</sup> Birkett, Dea. 2004. 'Island of Lost Girls', *The New York Times*, 29 October, section The Opinion Pages, Accessed 12 August 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/29/opinion/island-of-lost-girls.html>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Tomlinson, Simon. 2015. 'The paradise island where no one wants to live: HMS *Bounty* mutineers' settlement could die out because of dark legacy of child sex abuse', *Daily Mail*, 17 February, section Australia, Accessed 14 March 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2956889/The-paradise-island-no-one-wants-live-remote-British-colony-Pacific-risk-dying-dark-legacy-child-sex-abuse.html>

<sup>10</sup> Field, Michael. 2014. 'Is it lights out for Pitcairn Island?', *Stuff.co.nz*, 3 August, section World, Accessed 24 September 2016. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/world/south-pacific/10338206/Is-it-lights-out-for-Pitcairn-Island>

<sup>11</sup> Solomon, Rob, and Kirsty Burnett, *Pitcairn Island Economic Review* (Wellington, New Zealand: Solomon Leonard Ltd, 2014).

become a topic of growing interest to folklorists and anthropologists across the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand.

This issue of *Australian Folklore* (2016) includes a cluster of studies on Pitcairn, each approaching the space from a different theoretical perspective. The linguist, Joshua Nash, has provided two contributions toward the cluster—the first of which ('Is (the possibility of) unemployment a crime?') being a short comment that addresses the inherent issues and inner-conflicts faced by many scholars without tenure, who approach research goals, such as Nash's own Pitcairn work, without necessarily having a guaranteed stream of funding to complete them. Nash's second piece, a research article ('Inside(r)-outside(r): Toward a sociology and linguistics of space on Pitcairn Island'), lends consideration to the ties between language, spatial cognition and landscapes/ seascapes in the Pitkern dialect. That study is a significant contribution to this cluster as it focusses the attention of readers upon the notion that language, place and identity are inherently linked concepts—thus fitting neatly within the spectrum of building upon folkloristic understandings of the region's folk-cultures and identities. Maria Amoamo, who undertook considerable fieldwork on Pitcairn while completing her Ph.D., followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at Te Tumu, the School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies at the University of Otago, provides a tensed ethnographic study of key social interactions and activities that contribute to the shaping of the uniqueness of Pitcairn folklife and culture. Everett Parker, the editor of the international Pitcairn Island's Study Group's journal, the *Pitcairn Log*, makes comment on the role of the Tahitian women of the *Bounty*, linking to a recent issue of Pitcairn stamps. Here, the wide-spread international interest in Pitcairn philately should be remembered—a phenomenon that Parker neatly draws into focus. Archaeologists Martin Gibbs and David Roe have provided a very powerful discussion ('Do you bring your gods with you or do you find them there waiting? Reconsidering the 1790 Polynesian colonisation of Pitcairn Island'), focusing on the island's spiritual landscape. Gibbs and Roe stress possible variances in the spiritual interpretation of that landscape between Polynesian and European settlers, while highlighting different social functions that stemmed from those variances during the process of forging community-wide shared understandings of the landscape and spirituality/lore. Finally, Jøn, Philip Ward and J.S. Ryan have contributed a piece ('To Pitcairn and Beyond') that glimpses 'look-see' travel visits to both Pitcairn and the Galápagos group as contributive episodes in the shaping of Ryan's folkloristic mindset—linking also to the earlier themed section in this edition of *Australian Folklore*, 'Australasian Folkloristic Thinking'.

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