

MARY ANN CHRISTIAN, EXERCISING SOCIAL AND SPATIAL AGENCY: An isolated island case

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ABSTRACT: Mary Ann Christian (1793-1866) was the only daughter of chief *Bounty* mutineer Fletcher Christian and his Tahitian consort Mauatua who settled on Pitcairn Island in 1790. After a violent first decade, and one death to a natural cause, the male population was reduced to a sole male survivor – John Adams. This created a female-dominated milieu within which Mary Ann Christian operated with a strong degree of agency across social hierarchies involving island and empire actors, and spatially with her on- and off-island movements. While still a teenager, Mary Ann Christian became the inspiration for Mary Russell Mitford's exquisite protagonist in *Christina: The Maid of the South Seas: A Poem* (1811). Almost three decades later, Lieutenant Lowry visiting from the *Sparrowhawk* dubbed her a cantankerous “old maid” for her concern that girls aged 13, 14, and 15 were too young for marriage; male dominance had reasserted itself. Primary and other credible sources, including demographics, document the events surrounding Herstory.

KEYWORDS: Female Agency, Isolated Populations, Mary Ann Christian, Pitcairn Bible, Pitcairn Island

Introduction

On 28 April 1789, Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian forced Lieutenant William Bligh, the British commander of the HMY *Bounty*, and 18 loyalists into its launch (the largest of a ship's service boats) off Tofua in the Tonga Islands, South Pacific Ocean (Wahlroos, 2001). Bligh sailed over 3,600 nautical miles in 47 days to Kupang, Timor (current day Indonesia), ranking this one of the greatest open-boat journeys in the archives of maritime survival. While William Bligh eventually returned to England to fanfare and fame, Fletcher Christian never returned from the South Seas. After abandoning a disastrous settlement (Fort George) attempt on Tubuai, about 563 kilometres south of Tahiti, Christian sailed the *Bounty* to Tahiti to deposit those crewmembers wishing to live amongst their native friends. Those sailors opting for Tahiti knew that the British would eventually collect them for court martial (Kirk, 2008). After leaving Tahiti, 28 individuals consisting of the nine mutineers and six men, twelve women and an infant girl (Sully) from Polynesia, circuitously crisscrossed the South Pacific until sighting the remote Pitcairn Island (January 15, 1790). Unbeknownst to Fletcher Christian, the geographic coordinates reported in an onboard maritime volume edited by Hawkesworth (1773) placed Pitcairn Island 342 km west of its actual location (25° 04' S, 130° 06' W) (Pitcairn's Tourism Department, 2013, p. 21; Albert, 2018). The mutineers had found an uninhabited island, though it revealed evidence of previous Polynesian occupation. The new settlers found artifacts such as adzes, marae

(scared platforms), and domesticated plants including breadfruit, banana, taro, plantain, sugar cane, and other traditional Polynesian staples. The island's incorrect coordinates helped "hide" it from potential visitors and perhaps explain why 18 years passed before John Adams (last surviving original male) and the mutineers' children were 'rediscovered'.

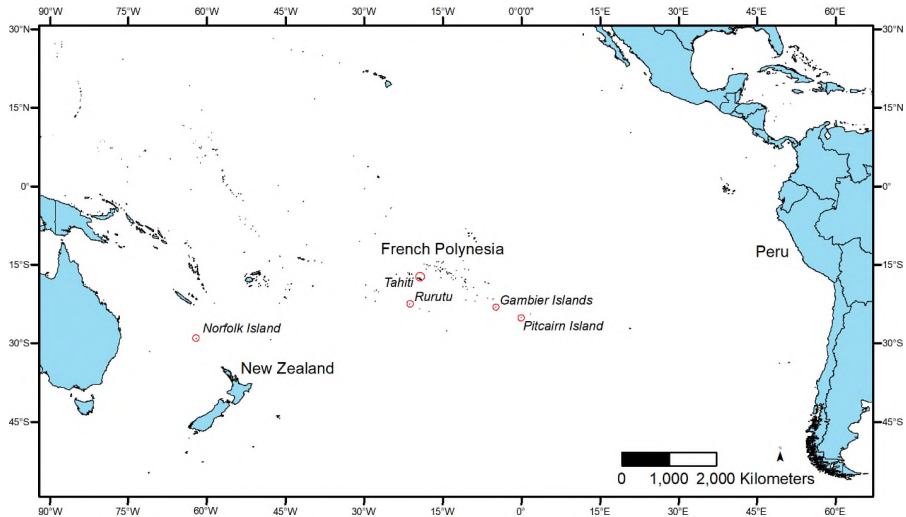


Figure 1 - Reference map of place names listed in this article.

Less than 50 descendants from this British-Polynesian population continue to live on Pitcairn Island in 2021. With outmigration, descendants of this historic population reside on Norfolk Island (1,748 people in 2016), Australia, and elsewhere (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Pitcairn is located midway between New Zealand and Chile; the closest inhabited places to Pitcairn Island are in the Gambier Islands of French Polynesia (Figure 1). Pitcairn Island is an eroding volcanic island 3.2 km in length and 1.6 km in width. Its highest point of 347 meters is located at Pawala Valley Ridge; rocks and steep cliffs surround the coast (Nicolson & Davies, 1997). Pitcairn Island encompasses 4.6 km² of land area and possesses a tropical marine climate somewhat tempered with its position just below the *Tropic of Capricorn* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Pitcairn is an overseas territory of the United Kingdom with a local council managing its internal affairs (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Pitcairn Island has 51 km of coastline and claims a 12 nm territorial sea and 200 nm exclusive economic zone. The islanders produce or catch (fish) much of their own food. The sale of curios (carvings, ship models, painted leaves) to tourists aboard visiting cruise ships generates personal income for some. Other income derives from the sale of stamps and honey, and from the financial support of the United Kingdom (Amoamo, 2017).

While countless books and articles have been written about the mutiny on the *Bounty* and Pitcairn Island (Albert, 2018; Alexander, 2003; Christian, 2005; Hough, 1973; Lummis, 2000; Wahlroos, 2001), the purpose of this study is to puzzle together disparate facts on Mary Ann Christian (1793-1866), the only daughter of Fletcher Christian. Should historians accept Lieutenant Lowry's unsympathetic description of Mary Ann Christian as a cantankerous "old maid" (Nicolson & Davies, 1997)? Lowry arrived at Pitcairn Island on 9

November 1839 on the HMS *Sparrowhawk* where he conducted a population census.¹ Does Lowry minimise her voice with his choice of “railings” to describe her distress over adolescent marriages occurring on Pitcairn Island in the 1830 and 40s? The author wanted to learn more about this obscure and interesting woman and explore ‘herstory’.

Islanders–Empire and Island Feminism Paradigms

Ideas from sociology, anthropology, and geography provide a prism to examine the interplay between the changing constraints that affected Mary Ann Christian’s agency or ability to independently navigate across social and spatial hierarchies. First, this investigation is underpinned by Thomas’ (2010) paradigm that islanders–empire (American, British, Spanish, and French) interactions in the Pacific Ocean during the 18th and 19th Centuries were dichotomous exchanges – survival versus suffering and invention versus exploitation were consequences of encountering each other. He further advocated that historians should listen to individual voices, famous or otherwise, to better interpret islanders–empire exchanges. Thomas’ (2010, p. 25) strategy is to “tell a larger story through individuals’ experiences and lives, through events and happenings, some of them small in the scheme of things, but remain resonant of the kinds of dealing that shaped the colonial relationships and culture.” Previously, the author has explored the life of Teehuteatuaonoa, also known as Jenny. She lived contemporaneously with Mary Ann Christian on Pitcairn Island for about twenty-five years. Jenny was able to return to Tahiti after a 29-year sojourn (1789–1818) around the Pacific; her journey has been captured in Google Earth (Albert, 2021a,b). In 1817, nine years after Mayhew Folger ‘rediscovered’ Pitcairn Island, Captain Caleb Reynolds of the *Sultan*, an American ship, provided Jenny passage to Chile and later to The Marquesas; subsequently, she made passage on the *King George*, a British vessel, to Tahiti where she began her journey. That through her own initiative she was able to return home speaks to Jenny’s strong will and effective agency. Her opportunity to leave Pitcairn Island was facilitated by an increasing number of ships crisscrossing the Pacific Ocean during the early 1800s. These ships were carrying whalers and sealers, traders and merchants, missionaries and colonials from Britain, France, Spain, the United States of America, Russia, and other countries. Pauline Reynolds has recognised the intrinsic value of the ‘forgotten’ women of the *Bounty*, including Jenny, in transmuting their Polynesian knowledge of growing crops, fishing, and making *tapa* (barkcloth) in their new Anglo-Polynesian community (Reynolds, 2011, 2016). The women of the *Bounty* were instrumental in ensuring the survival of their nascent community in the remote south-central Pacific. In 2020, the Pitcairn Islands and French Polynesia jointly issued a three-stamp cover, titled ‘Women of the Bounty’, to commemorate their important role in ensuring the survival of the early Pitcairners. This study uses Thomas’ *modus operandi* to investigate another lesser-known historic female figure, Mary Ann Christian, to explore a larger story of the impact of flip-flopping sex ratios (males to females) on female agency while living on a small, remote, and isolated island.

The second influence underpinning this study comes from Marina Karides, a sociologist currently employed in a Department of Geography and Environment. She advocates for an island feminism that explores “intersections of island with gender, sexuality, race, nation, and class” that contribute to social and spatial inequalities (Karides, 2017a, pp. 30–31). While

¹ Lieutenant James Lowry tallied a total population of 102 individuals evenly divided between males and females (51 each). He observed that children comprised a large percentage of the population. Further, Lowry noted that age of marriage for girls occurred around 14- and 15-years old as compared with men around 20 years.

feminism strives for equality between men and women, an island feminism requires a distinct understanding of the unique challenges of island life. Issues such as remoteness and isolation, natural hazards (volcanic eruptions, sea-level rise, tsunamis), small populations, out-of-balanced sex ratios and age distributions, and a myriad of other social, economic, and spatial constraints that challenge living in marginalised spaces and places (Karides, 2017b). In this study I will explore several questions, including: Who was Mary Ann Christian?; What extent did Mary Ann Christian actualise female agency to navigate social and spatial hierarchies?; and What are the implications of this study on further research on island feminism?

Background and Life Events

Mary Ann Christian (1793-1866) was born on Pitcairn Island and died on Norfolk Island seventy-two years later. She is the only daughter of Fletcher Christian and Mauatua, a full-blooded Tahitian; Mary Ann had two older brothers, Thursday October Christian (1790-1831) and Charles Christian (1792-1842) (Albert, 2019, 2020). Thursday October, the first born in this nascent community, has received noteworthy attention in the annals of Pitcairn Island. His younger brother, Charles Christian, “opposed the dictatorial rule of Joshua Hill” (Wahlross, 2001, pp. 318-319), an uninvited outsider who arrived under false pretences. Hill assumed control over the islanders for about five years beginning in 1832. In 1994, the Pitcairn Islands Philatelic Bureau issued stamps depicting early Pitcairners, including Thursday (Friday) October Christian; however, Mary Ann Christian, or for that matter Charles, is not among those so honoured. This section reviews some of the documented life events of Mary Ann Christian (Figure 2). She had numerous opportunities to interact with captains, officers, sailors, crewmembers, and guests from passing ships.

Mary Ann Christian, 1793-1866

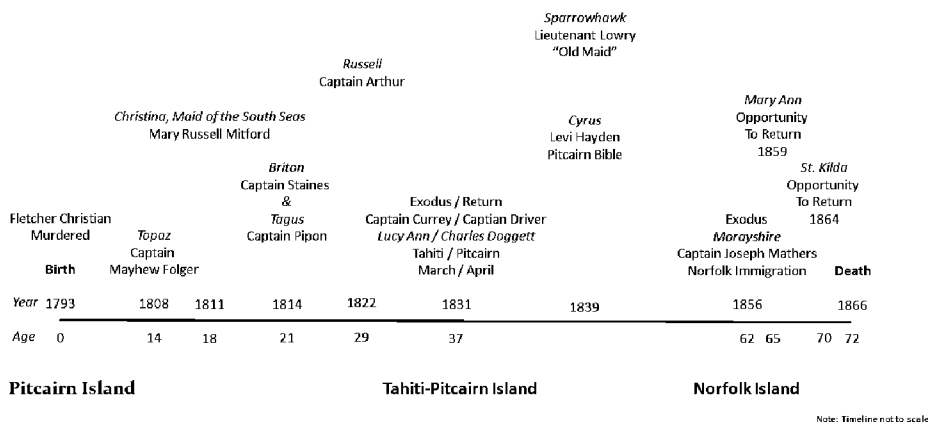


Figure 2 - Mary Ann Christian, 1793-1866, a timeline of significant life events from Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island.

Birth: The murder of Fletcher Christian occurred on 20 September 1793; according to Glynn Christian (2005, p. 331), Mary Ann’s birth occurred “[O]n the day of the first massacre” or per Wahlroos (2001, p. 324), “soon afterwards.” FamilySearch’s (2021) Pedigree Resource File lists Mary Ann Christian’s birth as occurring on 21 September 1793, the day after her

Albert: Mary Ann Christian

father's murder. Mauatua subsequently joined Edward Young; Mary Ann and her two brothers inherited three half siblings: Dorothy, Edward, and James Young (Figure 3) (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 54).

Parents	Fletcher Christian	1764-1793
	Mauatua (Maimiti) Christian Young	Unknown-1841
Siblings	Thursday October Christian	1790-1831
	Charles Christian	1792-1842
Half-siblings	Dorothy Young Buffett	1794-1863
	Edward Young	1797-1831
	James Young	1799-1806

Figure 3 - Mary Ann Christian, 1793-1866, parents, siblings and half-siblings. Source: Find A Grave, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com>: accessed 29 August 2018), memorial page for Mary Ann 'Lasso' Christian (October 1793-2 January 1866), Find A Grave Memorial no. 83768492, citing Norfolk Island Cemetery, Kingston, Norfolk Island; Maintained by Daryl & Barbara (Biggs) Mallett (contributor 46984947).

Early Years: In 1799, at age 6, Mary Ann Christian was one of 20 children less than 10 years old. At that time there were only two mutineers remaining, John Adams and Edward Young, and nine Polynesian women. With their offspring, this brought Pitcairn Island's total population to 31 persons (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, pp. 57-58). The murders and fatal accidents that characterised the first decade were over. The next year (1800), Edward Young died of natural causes, leaving John Adams as the sole survivor among the nine *Bounty* mutineers. John Adams began to teach, pray, and preach with the encouragement of *The Holy Bible* (1764) and the *Book of Common Prayers*. He conducted worship services in accordance with his remembrance of the traditions and rituals of the Church of England, often with more exuberance than required. Hence, Adams morphed from a mutineer struggling for survival to the islanders' beloved patriarch, the hierarchical civic and religious leader of the Pitcairn community. At this juncture, one might imagine that Mary Ann's life on Pitcairn Island became more tranquil.

1808-1814: Mary Ann Christian was aged 14 when American sealer Mayhew Folger arrived on the *Topaz* in February 1808. In *Fragile Paradise*, author Glynn Christian quotes a period report on Folger's visit describing Fletcher's children as "very handsome, their features strongly partaking of the English". He noted that "the beauty of one of them, a girl named Mary Ann Christian, for which she is termed the 'maid of the South Seas' is said to invite the same admiration which is offered to the most favoured of our own fair county women" (Christian, 2005, p. 319). Captain Mayhew Folger found that the "girls could read and write... and made cloth from the cloth tree, and attend to their domestic concerns" (Delano, 1817, pp. 141-142). Such chatter inspired Mary Russell Mitford to pen an epic poem titled *Christina, The Maid of the South Seas*, with Mary Ann Christian as a central character (Mitford, 1811).² Mary Ann Christian also appeared as the protagonist in two modern

² Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855), an English author, dramatist, and poet, wrote 'Christina: The Maid of the South Seas' (Mitford, 1811). The main character, Christina, is based on Fletcher Christian's only daughter, Mary Ann Christian, who was born in 1793. Mitford learned about the fate of *Bounty* and the nascent settlement on Pitcairn Island from reports describing Captain Mayhew Folger's encounter with the islanders in 1808. The poem novelises the aftermath of the mutiny and explores issues such as female violence against

historical fictions including Glynn Christian's *Mrs Christian: 'Bounty' Mutineer* (2011), and Ann Rinaldi's *Mutiny's Daughter* (2004). Glynn Christian portrayed an adult Mary Ann as a malcontent, antagonistic to life on Pitcairn Island, whereas, Rinaldi depicted Mary Ann at fourteen as a hopeful adolescent searching for her father among the streets of London. While Glynn Christian meshed fact and conjecture to present a plausible story line, Rinaldi's novel was pure speculation. After more than 225 years, the saga of the *Bounty* persists, as these recent books demonstrate. It is amazing, given the snail-like speed of travel in the early 1800s, that three years after Folger solved the mystery of the *Bounty's* whereabouts, *Christina, The Maid of the South Seas* appeared in print.

Captain Arthur and the Russell, 1822: On 9 March 1822, two vessels arrived at Pitcairn Island; one or both were whalers. The *Russell* of New Bedford, commanded by Captain Arthur, and another vessel, name unknown, commanded by Captain Arcy, went ashore to visit with the – by then – god-fearing islanders. Over several days, the islanders had the opportunity to interact with their guests. On departing, Captain Arthur would record that “a more affectionate leave than I ever did anywhere except my home” (Niles' Register, 1822; Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 87). The final farewell has John Adams, Dorothy (Dolly) Young, and Mary Ann Christian accompanying Captain Arthur aboard the *Russell* to trade a final time. Captain Arthur received coconuts and chickens, whereas the islanders received an axe, two hatchets, four knives, and other sundry items (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 87). Mary Ann and Dorothy's off-island excursion to meet visitors from outside was no doubt exciting for them. From this event, one could reasonably assume that Mary Ann Christian had a cordial relationship with the island's patriarch, John Adams, and her half-sister, Dorothy. This life event establishes Mary Ann as an integral and positive individual amongst the Pitcairners. Given Captain Arthur's heartfelt farewell, one might surmise that Mary Ann Christian had a pleasant demeanour. According to an account of this 1822 visit, Pitcairn's population stood at 53 people, which included John Adams and six of the original Tahitian women (Niles' Register, 1822). With a strong female presence, John Adams probably felt compelled to show deference to the women of Pitcairn. Hence, Mary Ann and Dorothy's ability to greet and trade with outside visitors, even that of going aboard ships was not thwarted.

First Immigrants 1820s: The now adult male islanders including Thursday October Christian, Charles Christian, Matthew Quintal, Arthur Quintal among others, together with several male immigrants began to increase their influence over Pitcairn's political,

male subjugation, female objectification derived from “dangerous male desires,” and latent female bisexuality. This latter scenario unfolded as Christina found safe haven from uncongenial islanders during a relocation to a “community of like-minded women in a secluded rural convent and finally with her childhood friend Isabel” (Beshero-Bondar, 2011, p. 161). Another theme included the conflicting connections between the past and the present with Christina forming an “attachment to her dead mother instead of her living adopted father” John Adams (Beshero-Bondar, 2011, p. 138). Christina chose “domesticity, particularly parental and sibling affection” over erotic passion when agreeing to marry the Polynesian-English islander Hubert (Addison, 1998). However, when Hubert failed to show for the ceremony, English Henry, her Caucasian love interest from a visiting ship, becomes the groom. Mitford created Christina as a “fair skinned” and submissive maiden, English qualities of the era that clash with the violent past of the darker Polynesian women post mutiny on Pitcairn Island (Beshero-Bondar, 2009, p. 285). That Christina had agreed to marry Hubert per John Adams wishes, even though Hubert failed to show, demonstrated her sense of family and community duty. Addison (2004, p. 73) surmises that Christina was rewarded for her “patience and obedience.” Her marriage to a white-skinned outsider suggests she viewed life through a racist lens, according to Beshero-Bondar (2009, p. 285).

educational, and religious leadership positions (John Buffett, 1823; John Evans, 1823; George Nobbs, 1828).

Tahitian Immigration 1831 (7 March – 23 March): Mary Ann Christian's name appeared on the manifest of the British barque (sailing ship) named the *Lucy Ann* that transported the entire Pitcairn population totalling 86 or 87 individuals to Tahiti (Murray, 1992, p. 87; Nicolson & Davies, 1997, pp. 241-243; Kirk, 2008, pp. 80-81). This was a tragic period for Pitcairners as almost one-fifth of their population died of a contagious disease because of their visit to Tahiti. Included among these deaths was Mary Ann's oldest brother, Thursday October Christian (Silverman, 1967, p. 117). The Pitcairners began returning home almost immediately; a small group returned on 27 June 1831, and the remaining 65 arrived on 4 September 1831 on the *Charles Doggett* of Salem, Massachusetts (Wahlroos, 2001, p. 344).

The Hill Dictatorship, 1832-1837: Mary Ann was a confident individual; however, she met her match in Joshua Hill, an outsider from Britain pretending to have the authority to govern the Pitcairn Islanders. Hill is often referred to as the dictator of Pitcairn Island because of his tyrannical rule. In one instance, Hill prevented Mary Ann from visiting Dorothy, whose husband was recovering from a flogging over trivial comments he had made after church services. That she tried to defy Hill, an outright bully, suggests that she had spunk (Nechtman, 2018).

Captain Elliot, HMS. Fly and Pitcairn's Constitution (November 29, 1838): Pitcairn's first constitution, drafted under the guidance of Captain Elliott, conveyed rights and a code of laws to the islanders. Some highlights were that males and females at least 18 years old could vote for a magistrate each year; education became compulsory for children, male and female, aged from 6 to 16; and other such rules and regulations unique to their rustic lifestyle. While the constitution specified 18 as the age of suffrage, curiously there was no age requirement for marriage. While equal suffrage recognises the political importance of females, that no age is given for legal marriages doubtless echoes male dominance re-emerging on Pitcairn Island in the 1830s.

Sparrowhawk's Visit, 1839 (9 November): During Lieutenant James Lowry's visit on the *Sparrowhawk* in 1839, he described an almost 50-year-old Mary Ann "as cross and crabbed as any old maid need be; she rails against the early marriages most heartily" (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 168). She would have just turned 46 years old, so Lowry's estimate was slightly on the high side. Her passion against early marriages is probably in response to a string of young brides (14, 14, 15, 12, and 14) that was occurring during this time (1836-1839) (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, pp. 168-169). While "premarital sex was not frowned upon" (Salmond, 2010, p. 224) among adolescents on Tahiti, such young marriages were not the norm among Anglo-Christian communities. On Pitcairn Island in the 1830s, marriages between 14- to 15-year-old girls and 20-year-old men were common (Brodie, 1851, p. 167).

Cyrus and The Pitcairn Bible 1839 (17 July): One of the more lasting legacies of Mary Ann Christian involves the Pitcairn Bible (The Holy Bible, 1764). During the 1839 visit of the whaling ship *Cyrus*, Mary Ann Christian gifted to Levi Hayden what is now known as the Pitcairn Bible (Figure 4). The whereabouts of this book is recorded in the *New York Times* (17 January 1897), and summarised by Herb Ford (2012, p. 18) in *Pitcairn as a Port of Call*:

The ship's carpenter, Levi Hayden is given two old Bibles, one by John Adams, grandson of the Pitcairn patriarch, and one by Mary Christian, daughter of the mutineer Fletcher Christian. (...) The one given by Mary

Christian becomes known as the 'Pitcairn Bible.' (...) The Pitcairn Bible is given by Hayden to the Rev. Daniel M. Lord of the Fort Hill Seamen's Bethel, a mariner's church in Boston. In 1924 it is donated to the Lenox Library collection of old and unusual Bibles. Today this collection, with the Pitcairn Bible, is in the Rare Book Division of the New York Public Library.

A photograph from the Pitcairn Bible's front matter showing Mary Christian's inscription to Levi Hayden (Figure 4c) appeared in *The Lookout*, a magazine published by the Seamen's Church Institute of New York (1959). It reads, "Presented to Mr. Levi Hayden From. Mrs. Mary Christian of Pitcairns' Island. August 20, 1839." Given current conventions, the use of the title 'Mrs.' preceding her name refers to a married woman. According to Merriam-Webster (2019), the archaic title 'mistress' was used for a married or unmarried woman and abbreviated as Mrs. Nonetheless, the inscription presents good penmanship and supports previous claims that children learned to read and write on Pitcairn Island.



Figure 4a - The Pitcairn Bible: binding (top left), 4b - title page (top right); 4c - front matter (bottom left), and 4d back matter (bottom right). Photographs from Kyle R. Triplett, Librarian on November 4th, 2018. The Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room for Rare Books and Manuscripts. The New York Public Library.

Albert: Mary Ann Christian

Norfolk Immigration, 1856: Mary Ann Christian and the entire community left Pitcairn Island for Norfolk Island, 6000 km west across the South Pacific (Murray, 1992, pp. 80-82). The decision became forefront in 1853 when increasing population, a long drought, and reduced crops brought on “not quite a famine, but so near it” (Kirk, 2008, p. 113). The resulting sickness and hunger attributable to sustainability issues, population carrying capacity, and depletion of resources forced the issue of relocation.

Mary Ann (ship, arrived 17 January 1859 at Pitcairn Island from Norfolk Island): Mary Ann Christian was not among the 16 former Pitcairn Islanders of the Moses and Mayhew Young families that left Norfolk Island on the *Mary Ann* and returned to Pitcairn Island.

St. Kilda, 1863-1864 (18 December - 2 February): 26 people (31 says Shapiro [1936, p. 122]) returned to Pitcairn Island on the ship *St. Kilda*. Once again Mary Ann, then 70 years old, elected to remain on Norfolk Island. This second group included mostly Youngs and Christians, the former of step-lineage and the latter from her own natural lineage. One of the passengers was Rosalind Amelia Young, a girl aged 10, who would go on to author the well-known and now rare *Mutiny of the Bounty and Story of Pitcairn Island 1790-1894* (Young, 1894, pp. 163-164). With two opportunities to return to Pitcairn Island, 1858 and 1864, it is probable that either age, health, security, or some other reason(s) anchored Mary Ann to Norfolk. Further, being unmarried and without children, she would not have had to consider the wishes of a husband or children pining to return to Pitcairn Island. Whether one stayed or left, these were emotional times for the exiled Pitcairners; Mary Ann Christian would no doubt have had to battle strong separation anxieties (Young, 1894).

Death: Mary Ann Christian died of dropsy, a swelling of the limbs with fluid, on 2 January 1866. She lived 72 years, and not the 69 years engraved on her tombstone. She substantially outlived both her older brothers who died at ages 40 (Thursday October) and about 50 (Charles), respectively. Her grave is located in the Norfolk Island Cemetery, in Kingston, Norfolk Island (Figure 5). Her epitaph states that she was “A KIND & MOTHERLY AUNT.”



Figure 5 - Tombstone of Mary Ann Christian, Norfolk Island Cemetery, Kingston, Norfolk Island. It reads: IN MEMORY of MARY CHRISTIAN WHO DIED JANUARY 2ND 1866, AGED 69 YEARS, A KIND & MOTHERLY AUNT. Come unto me all ye that are weary and I will give you rest. Source: Coffee King (used with permission from Chris Gurnsey)

<https://www.findagrave.com/user/profile/49162771>

Isolated Populations, Demographics, and Marriage Patterns

This discussion places Mary Ann Christian within the demographic context that existed from 1793, the year of her birth on Pitcairn Island, to 1856 when she relocated to Norfolk Island. She had to contend with living on a remote speck of land far removed from outside contacts. Visiting ships were the only connection with the rest of the world, a lifeline to people, supplies, and world news. Isolated populations must adjust to demographic issues owing to small numbers. Finding compatible marriage partners might prove challenging. Another complication is that the union between the mutineers and their Polynesian consorts produced a biracial community. For reasons not entirely known, perhaps induced abortions and infanticide, there were no recorded births from liaisons between the full-blooded Polynesians brought to Pitcairn Island by the *Bounty*.

Harry L. Shapiro, a physical anthropologist employed by the American Museum of Natural History, arrived at Pitcairn Island on 23 December 1934 from San Francisco aboard the *Zaca*, a two-masted schooner. During his ten-day visit, Shapiro compiled data on age of marriage, age of parents at birth of first child, number of males versus females, and other demographic variables. From 1815-1839, the average age of first marriage for females was 15 years and 3 months, with the first child on average born to mothers at age 17 years and 1 month. Shapiro's statistics suffer from small numbers; however, these substantiate Mary Ann's claim that early marriages for girls were occurring. The average age of marriage of females and first-born jumped to 21 years and 10 months and 22 years and 9 months, respectively, for those females born between 1840 and 1864. These statistics incorporate larger numbers than the 1815-1839 timeframe, so are more credible and less influenced by outliers. While inbreeding increased over roughly seven decades from 1850-1959 to 1910-1916, a good initial genetic pool and the introduction of additional gene diversity from immigrants helped ward off problems associated with inbreeding (Shapiro, 1936, pp. 217-241).

Shapiro used Pitcairn's *Book of Records* to gain an historic perspective of the island's population change from 1790. He created a table summarising total population by males and females, age ranges, births and deaths, population increase, and numerous other variables over time (Shapiro, 1936, pp. 217-254). He noted that Pitcairn's population rose from 35 to 40 individuals between 1808 and 1814 (Shapiro, 1936, p. 235). Eleven years later, in 1825, the number of Pitcairn Islanders increased to 66, with 36 males and 30 females, six more men than women, however, two of these men were Mary Ann's brothers, and one the aging mutineer, John Adams.

While Mary Ann might have married before 1808 or after 1825, this period (1808-1825) would have been opportune given her age range of 15-32. By 1856, Pitcairn's population reached 193, with females outnumbering males by five (Shapiro, 1936, p. 235). Mary Ann had turned 63 years old and, after a lifetime of singlehood, she was probably not considering marriage. Had she wanted to find a husband, she could have done so decades before, getting married to either a native-born Pitcairner, an early immigrant, or a sailor from the 300 plus ships that visited Pitcairn Island from 1808 to 1856 (Brodie, 1851, p. 249). Her single status appeared to have generated much interest, almost to an incessant degree. For example, Captain Henry King of the *Elizabeth*, in a survey of residents during his 1819 visit to Pitcairn Island, added "spinster" after her name (King, 1820, p. 388). There are several reasons, including personal inclinations, a scarcity of eligible bachelors, or just the freedom of being unattached as to why a person never marries. During the 1800s, an

unmarried woman was referred to as a 'spinster', someone that is over normal age of marriage or unlikely to ever get married. It is an archaic term today, but during Mary Ann's lifetime, the word was in common usage. Another account reported that she "remains unmarried," as if this were an ongoing crisis in a soap opera (*The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies*, 1820, p. 39).

Frederick Debell Bennett, in *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage Round the Globe from the Year 1833 to 1836*, included two tidbits on the marriage perspectives of two Pitcairners (Bennett, 1840). F. D. Bennett recounts an interview that G. Bennett, his brother no less, had with the self-exiled Jane Quintal (b. 1794-99); she had left Pitcairn Island on 19 December 1826 on the *Lovely Ann* for Rurutu (French Polynesia) (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 221). G. Bennett encountered Jane Quintal, "a tall, fine, half-caste woman," walking a beach on Rurutu in September 1829 (Bennett, 1840, p. 31). He asked her why she left Pitcairn Island. Jane blurted out, "[T]here are no husbands there" (Bennett, 1840, p. 32). Jane recounted that she married soon after arriving on Rurutu, and even had had a child. She was comfortable on Rurutu and had no "wish to return" to Pitcairn Island. For Jane Quintal, the shortage of men pushed her away from Pitcairn, whereas a comfortable life and prospects for marriage and family pulled her to Rurutu. Jane Quintal was between the ages of 27-32 when she left Pitcairn, and of course, three years later during G. Bennett's encounter she would have been between the ages 30-35. Jane and Mary Ann were about the same age, so the latter could have left too if she had yearnings for a life that included marriage.

The other item from Bennett's *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage* includes an account about another Mary Christian (b. c. 1811, d. 1852), the daughter of Thursday October Christian and Teraura (Susannah) (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 222). Unfortunately, Kirk (2008, p. 69), in an otherwise meticulously documented work, confused Teraura's daughter Mary with Fletcher Christian's daughter Mary Ann. The Mary mentioned by Bennett was actually Mary Ann's niece, Mary (Big Melly) Christian. According to Bennett (1840, p. 33), she was the "only spinster on the island." Bennett stated that she "preserves in refusing the offers of her countrymen, to whom she expresses great aversion, but, unfortunately, her antipathy has not extended to Europeans, and a very fair infant claims her material attentions". Bennett's (1840, p. 33) reference to Mary, as a "young and interesting female" does not refer to Mary Ann Christian (Nicolson & Davies, 1997, p. 226). During Bennett's visit beginning on 7 March 1834, Mary Ann was aged 40, which is not exactly young, whereas, Mary (Big Melly) was 28 or 29 years old. Why was Big Melly so against marriage to island-born men? Was she prejudiced against biracial men? All three of her children – a daughter and two sons – were born out-of-wedlock with John Buffett, the Englishman who arrived on Pitcairn Island in 1823 (Wahlroos, 2001, pp. 308-309). Did Mary Ann Christian influence Big Melly's opinion on marriage and race? This seems possible.

Discussion

Who was Mary Ann Christian: To circle back to one of the original questions, who was Mary Ann Christian? She was born amidst a violent and chaotic time that permeated this isolated community during the 1790s. From 1799, life began to calm down with just John Adams and Edward Young among the surviving mutineers. On first post-mutiny contact with outsiders (Mayhew Folger) in 1808, Mary Ann became known as an exotic beauty memorialised as the heroine of Mary Russell Mitford's book-length poem, *Christina, the Maid of the South Seas*. While there is no record of Mary Ann ever learning she was the inspiration for Christina, the fact that she inspired the creation of this poem, via the prism

of Folger, echoes the power of her own charm and persona and demonstrates an innate agency. With 300 ships calling on Pitcairn Island from 1808 until her relocation to Norfolk Island, it is unfathomable she would not have heard something of her literacy fame. The more appropriate question might be, when did she find out? How might have this flattering accolade influenced her self-esteem, confidence, and, ultimately, the level of agency she would manifest? We know from recorded tidbits of her life that she was not a wallflower; she was an integral member of the community. The historic record of her encounters suggest that she had an adventurous spirit and was filled with excitement over gifting, trading, and entertaining visitors from the outside world. She was a hospitable, generous, and a pleasant person. Just a month before gifting what has become known as the Pitcairn Bible to Levi Hayden, she exhibited another aspect of her personality – that of a boisterous and obnoxious malcontent, at least according to Lieutenant Lowry. For reasons unknown, she had concerns over young marriages, a practice common during the 1830s on Pitcairn Island.

It is unknown how Mary Ann felt about leaving Pitcairn Island in 1856. She was 62 at this time and would live another 10 years on Norfolk Island. That her tombstone reads, “A Kind & Motherly Aunt,” is a testament that she had a genuine concern for her family. Mary Ann Christian was a beautiful young woman, adventurous and daring (climbing aboard ships), cordial with her half-sister Dorothy Young and John Adams, and exuded a pleasant demeanour. Overwhelmingly, the evidence supports the image of Mary Ann Christian as an active and vibrant member of the early Pitcairn community. Perhaps she became disillusioned with age – at least with respect to the early age at which girls were getting married. For herself, she was committed to singlehood out of choice, even though period publications repeatedly referred to her as a “spinster” or unmarried (The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register, 1820, p. 39; King, 1820, p. 388). This again illustrates an innate agency to maintain self against peer-pressure or sexual and gender expectations around marriage.

Actualising Female Agency: Karides (2017, p. 32) penned that feminism “is action oriented, in pursuit of just and fair conditions for all beings”. Herstory is replete with accounts of Christian enjoying the freedom to navigate across social and spatial hierarchies. Under a male-dominated environment, female social and spatial interactions are often restrictive with divisions becoming manifest. That Mary Ann Christian was able to overcome numerous social and spatial stereotypes for much of her life is a by-product of the island’s demographics. In 1800, when Mary was seven years old, there was just one adult male, John Adams, remaining on Pitcairn Island with nine of the original Polynesian women. Adams probably had little choice but to respect Mary Ann and the surviving Polynesian women; gender disparities were minimal until the first-generation children became adults and balanced out the Pitcairn’s sex-ratio. During most of the decades from 1800 onward the population was bi-racial, so racial disparities were inconsequential. It is within this demographic setting that Mary Ann was able to successfully claim her right to converse, trade and exchange gifts with visitors both on land (on island) and sea (off island). As the years passed on Pitcairn Island, however, males began to reassert control of public life. Historic accounts mentioning Mary Ann Christian appeared less and less in Pitcairn’s archives.

Mary’s encounter with Captain Author aboard the *Russell* indicates that in 1822 she still had the freedom to interact across social ranks (islander/officer) and between spatial spheres (island/ship). In this year, there were still six Tahitian women from the original settlement, plus additional adult females like Mary’s stepsister, Dorothy Young. Over the

next 10 years, four male immigrants helped reassert male dominance. For example, the total population was 66 in 1825, 36 males and 30 females. While there is parity between males and females at 53 each in 1839, by this time the island magistrate, preacher, and teacher were all positions controlled by men (Shapiro, 1936, p. 235). That Mary Ann challenged, though unsuccessfully, Hill's order not to visit her stepsister after her husband's flogging demonstrates she possessed a strong sense of individual agency.

From a teenager, through her 20s, 30s, and 40s to a lesser extent, Mary Ann Christian navigated successfully across gender, social, and class hierarchies and across the on/off island spatial divide. During these decades, the historic record reviewed here supports the notion that she independently exercised individual freedom to foster contacts across social class and hierarchies (islanders, captains, officers, crew, and carpenter). With the exception of a failed relocation to Tahiti in 1831, and a final move to Norfolk Island, Mary Ann's spatial range included on island locations and off island ship visits. However, her independence began to experience a waning trajectory with the arrival of early male immigrants in the 1820s and the assumption of dictatorial control by Joshua Hill (1832-1837). While the arrival of early immigrants and Hill's rise and fall have been mentioned, the islanders under the direction of George Nobbs, the island's pastor, schoolmaster, and record keeper, entreated Captain Elliot of the HM *Fly* (1838) to draft Pitcairn's first constitution. Elliott's actions tenuously placed Pitcairn Island under British colonial rule. While the constitution provided for women's suffrage, access to schools, and other positive rights that encompassed a first-wave feminist footing, one of the other regulations limited the spatial movement of women; it read:

No females are allowed to go on board of a foreign vessel, of any size or description, without the permission of the magistrate; and in the case the magistrate does not go on board himself, he is to appoint four men to look after the females. (Kirk, 2008, p. 90)

Note the regulation assumes the magistrate would be male with the references "himself" and "he." Further, control of female spatial off island movement, that is embarking on ships, would be supervised by no less than four men should the magistrate not be available. Going into the 1840s, Mary Ann Christian appears infrequently in the archives of Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands, and seems to fade in her latter decades.

Future Research: While the author has previously explored the female agency exerted by Teehuteatuaonoa (aka Jenny), one of the twelve Polynesian consorts who arrived on Pitcairn Island in 1790, at least two other women from this cohort might prove interesting case studies. Mauatua, the Tahitian wife of Fletcher Christian, and mother to Mary Ann Christian, is one. In his historical fiction, Glynn Christian (2011) paints her as a revolutionary espousing freedom from male subjugation. Another candidate is Teraura, who murdered Titahiti – one of the Polynesian men brought to Pitcairn Island on the *Bounty* – using an axe in an act of revenge (Wahlroos, 2001). Besides Pitcairn Island, the plight of women, past or present, enmeshed within small populations on remote and isolated islands should be further explored. Palmerston and Clipperton Islands in the Pacific Ocean and Tristan da Cunha in the Atlantic Ocean come to mind. In the case of Palmerston and Tristan da Cunha, both historic and current periods might be investigated; the Clipperton Islands are currently uninhabited. It appears that drastic changes in sex-ratios can seriously influence the degree of female agency obtainable on isolated, remote, and sparsely populated island communities.

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