

The Pits of Pitcairn

KRISTOFFER LAWSON
mailto:setok@fishpool.com

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The final dot of greatness

A story of great fascination to me is the case involving the remote island of Pitcairn with six men — almost half the male population — being convicted with allegations of systematic sexual abuse of young women (originally the trial included seven men but one was acquitted). My own trail of intrigue started with the BBC website and reports describing the events as they were taking place, and then onto the background of the place itself with the article *Bloody history of empire's last outpost* by Joe Boyle and the issues raised in another BBC article, *'Sins of a few' trouble Pitcairn* by Michael Brooke.

Pitcairn's past as a part of the British Empire started in 1789 when Fletcher Christian and his accomplices mutinied on the *Bounty* and settled on a remote island which was incorrectly marked on the maps. However, in the 1820s the British were asked to evacuate Pitcairn for fears of overpopulation, and did so, but many later returned. Seven years later it was annexed into the Empire. Now it is Britain's last outpost in the Pacific and, in its isolation, a symbol of the decline of an imperian power.

Sins of a few?

My main focus here is Michael Brooke's article and the way in which it constructs an almost romantic image of island life while brushing aside the dirty and awkward issues of sex with minors. It is unknown whether he decides to do this in order to avoid repeating what other articles already deal with or if he considers there to be more important matters at stake. We cannot assume it was intended merely as a take on Pitcairn life as then the points raised concerning the case itself would be irrelevant and distracting. This romanticisation is indeed dangerous as the method is in fact used as part of the defence, which claimed that such sexual practises were traditional to Pitcairn, that the young girls willingly participated, and that the prosecuted had not knowingly done anything wrong (a claim which is, in fact, disputed by Emily Fielden in the *Guardian*[3]).

Brooke seems particularly worried about over-expenditure of the government on officials and lawyers working with the trial, stating, "The most obvious concern is the sheer expense". Obvious to whom? It certainly was not amongst the first questions that popped up in most other reports. What of the universal rights of women and minors, or of the reach of British legal practises, or of the nature and responsibilities of sovereignty (foreign or otherwise)? Brooke's approach might be understandable if it was a burden on the Pitcairn economy, but he later goes on to say:

Joe Boyle's 'bloody history' article also reflects on otherness as he ponders on the islanders' traditional good humour and self-reliance:

“Many believe the islanders will need all this and much more if their unique community is to survive the latest incursion from the outside world.”

Clearly some form of self-rule and non-interference has been violated to allow this kind of wording. Joe Boyle does not get into the argument over whether this kind of influence should or should not happen, but even here Britain cannot escape from the perception of itself as an external power.

However, Pitcairn will not become independent. It has nothing to gain from it and would unlikely be able to sustain itself. At the same time its very existence tells the tale of a dissolving and devolving empire. Of how even old links to a motherland are soon replaced by situation and new allegiances. A far-away place is, and remains to be, a far-away place and as the links unravel, empire ceases to work and ceases to exist. The reporting surrounding the abuse charges of this imperfect paradise proves, through wording and attitudes, just how inevitable this is.

References

- [1] Michael Brooke: *'Sins of a few' trouble Pitcairn*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/2990726.stm
- [2] Joe Boyle: *Bloody history of empire's last outpost*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3693574.stm>
- [3] Emily Fielden, *He Knew It Was Wrong*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1336591,00.html>