

# Michael Evans

## THE PASSION OF LIEUT. WM. BLIGH

### I. Assumptions

*never in this  
world will a man live well in his body  
save dying*

—William Carlos Williams

1.

“Unquote.” (CMI 25)

The first action assumes a frontier, a margin, space beyond & between what is named.

Wm. Bligh served as navigating officer aboard the *HMS Resolution* during Captain James Cook’s third & final voyage of exploration in the Pacific. On January 17, 1779, Cook landed on Hawai’i during the festival of Makahiki, & (as tradition has it) was greeted as the returning God Rono. Feasts were made. The “great white god” was honored. But Cook & his crew overstayed their welcome. On February 13, 1779, tensions mounted over thefts of goods from the *Resolution*, and during the night the *Discovery*’s cutter was stolen from the buoy where it was moored. Cook’s response was to take prisoners: “It had been his usual practice, whenever any thing of consequence was lost, at any of the islands in this ocean, to get the king, or some of the principal *Erees*, on board, and to keep them as hostages, till it was restored” (ECJC 266).

2.

*“Wednesday 22nd April (1778). Here I must observe that I have no where met with Indians who had such high notions of every thing the Country produced*

74



(a common memorandum  
of our time & transposed  
into my fair . . .)

28 April 1789

Just before Sun Rise the People Mutinied seized me while asleep in my  
Cabbin tied my Hands behind my back—carried me on Deck in my  
Shirt—Put 18 of the Crew into the Launch & me after them and set us  
a drift—

Tofoa bearing NE 10 leag.<sup>s</sup>—  
Ship steered to the WNW.—  
Four cutlasses were thrown into the Launch.—

2.  
. . . & finally the latitude  
corrected sextant  
reading of the Sun the lower limbs  
& the Star

tatowed on Fletcher Christian's left breast  
(His knees a little & particularly His hands)

water & everyone Wet.—

This Rough account—  
barely daylight & the surface of 3,000 miles to Timor  
a league is  
a kind of Supplication (25 Men remained  
with Christian—

a good name & not one among them . . .)  
We were deep & rowed.—

Thursd.<sup>y</sup> 30 April 1789

Hard Gales.—At Night served a Cocoa Nut to each Man & slept again  
in the Boat.—At Dawn of day landed in search of Provisions. No suc-  
cess.

3.

We were very wet & Cold.

& what do I omit but obviously  
intend . . . & how the copy goes into the Journal  
to justify I am a Man

to be remembered

Wronged (if I shall die  
can I assume but all of us) & Christ.<sup>n</sup>  
his tatowed Breast & Star  
on his back sleeps in my Cabbin—

I do not suffer (distress great  
& in the greatest danger of foundering)  
without Thinking on him.

Sunday cont.<sup>d</sup>

and after supplication from People at 8 at Night bore away (Norton  
killed) after prayers agreeing to live.—our Stock of Provisions about  
150 lbs Bread 28 gall.<sup>s</sup> Water 20 lbs Pork 3 Bottles of Wine & 5 Quts  
Rum—at Noon lat.<sup>d</sup> 19° 27'S 183.52 E

Every one was satisfied.

### III. *Enactments*

1.

The event is the beginning of its recollection. The voyage commences  
in delay, two weeks lost for lack of orders.

2.

At Pitcairn Island, at Timor & Tofoa, the *Bounty's* crew thins according  
to disease & axe—murder & fever—the land an ending the ocean never  
was. To sail is to be in process.

3.

Mutiny is a form to which the names are stitched. The years adrift. His  
story a conceit in present tense.

4.  
Drunk is how the voyage ends.

IV. *Facsimile*

4.  
It was Noon & great difficulty  
I could observe the Suns alt.<sup>d</sup> Divided 5  
by each of us in the Boat—

Master

Boatswain Gunner Carpenter Master's Mate  
Midshipman Quarter Master's Mate Sailmaker  
Quarter Master Boy Midshipman Clerk  
Acting Surgeon Botanist Cook Butcher Cook.

At Sunset Marked a log line  
& taught the Men to count . . .

These are the gifts  
from Christian—sextant & a copy of Moore's *Navigator*—  
by which I know always where I am  
—how honest

& how Cold.

5.  
Saturd.<sup>y</sup> 9 May 1789  
Fair pleas.<sup>t</sup> Trade & smooth water.—

Empl.<sup>d</sup> cleaning the Boat & drying cloaths

Served a Gill of Water &  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. of Bread for Supper  
Sang a Song & went to Sleep

Served a Gill of Cocoanut Milk for Breakfast  
Fine W.<sup>t</sup>

6.

. . . What is meant (we put out Oars)  
between Isld.<sup>s</sup> the ocean  
nothing but surface & no  
Wind—we are a drift—Fear to Land & be  
hated  
(Poor Norton he is dead).—

### V. Displacements

1.

Shuffling

between the page & its continuation—the breadth (what stands apart is the future) & what ceases at the margin of Moore's epistolary *Life of Byron*—the spine & binding the pages an ugly bitterness of print—of *dear & dear & dear* omitted after every date—is it too late into the century for gestures reaching beyond forgetting the body—*I am a better Christian than those parsons of yours, though not paid for being so . . .* (LB v2, 330).

Balance necessitates form—the two of everything—& what combines

2.

This much is true—

In 1976 the National Library of Australia bought *The Bligh Notebook* at auction in London for \$73,000. In 1986 a facsimile edition of the notebook & a companion volume containing the transcription were published under the auspices of The Morris West Trust Fund. The facsimile's first edition consisted of 500 bound & numbered copies and 50 unbound & numbered sets, thereby creating a simulacrum of a rarity that is itself rare.

*The simulacrum is true*  
—Ecclesiastes

This much I have copied . . .

VI. *Facsimile*

*Space and the language to describe it make a ship.*

—Greg Dening

7.

Tuesd.<sup>y</sup> 12 May 1789

Looking up—reckoning the *here*  
by Sun & the day by Sun

until the day  
construes a concept of day

& I wish myself abandoned  
to a future more certain than prayer.  
Sextant & the sloshing into the Launch—

Cloudy W.<sup>r</sup> & much Sea—cant keep our course.

What separates us from the living  
above & below?—

Saw a Gannet & a piece of Wood—  
See Fish but can catch none—  
Tropic Birds & Sheerwaters.—

One man

is all I am . . . Much Rain . . .

One man  
& one compl.<sup>d</sup> cholick.—

I am sick—What things I had Saved  
are rotten w.<sup>th</sup> wet.





Weather & this Hunger that occupies the Mind. (Where is Christ.?)  
My body is my mind—is how I think these Days searching for Land &  
then

Afraid of what we  
find.—These is.<sup>lds</sup>  
be teaming with

Cannibals. (This is not a Ship & I am not a captain except to Order  
that we dry our cloathes & Eat small . . .) Where is the body that has  
betrayed me? Below me sharks—Above the flying Noddies Man of War  
Birds & Kinds of Gulls out of reach—

Me between—a man  
holding fast to the ribs  
of the launch—This is  
not a voyage Full gales  
& no Sun for days

& I do not know where I am. With every wave we could be lost. We  
could be nowhere nearer our Salvation. A man comp.<sup>ld</sup> of cholick.—  
Others just as Ill.— One fish the size of a Man would surely save Us

9.

Mond.<sup>y</sup> 18 May 1789

Very wet & Noddies & a kind of Gull ab.<sup>t</sup>

Steering by the Waves.—  
Nothing to Shelter us—pain in our Bones

Confused Sea

Rain w<sup>c</sup>.<sup>h</sup> keeps us . . . Bread & Water . . .

Bone Complaints.—

No Obs.—  
No thing to See.

VII. *Reckoning*

Not to interrupt implies acceptance, a desire perhaps for story & the  
*need* for heroes.

I take what is theirs & give it back in pieces.

VIII. *Facsimile*

10.

Is the soul so light  
in birds They alone can fly?  
Caught a Noddy by Hand

& split it 18 ways—the entrails came to me.—  
Sucked the blood sucked the marrow  
from its hollow bones.—

11.

I am He who Finds the Sun each Noon—

the One who reads the sextant's Sight.<sup>s</sup>  
& Calculates that we are still  
alive—I trust no man to prove as much—  
or say who eats—or when.

12.

Remarks Friday 29 May

Fine W.<sup>r</sup>—

Land first seen an Isl.<sup>d</sup>

At  $\frac{1}{4}$  past 5 Got into a Bay on the NW side of an Isl.<sup>d</sup>  
next to Round Top & landed on a Sandy Point call  
Restoration Point.

Found oysters & water  
Skeleton of a Snake 8 feet long hung on a Tree.—

No Inhabitants but signs of having been . . .

All happy at this Providential entry.—

13.

Luxury of sand & dry  
grass. I brought us here—  
past Barriers  
past Reef the breaking Sea—My Hand

Hard on every shoulder Saying  
Pull Pull Pull—

I've made a List of those Rebellious Men  
& placed them gain<sup>st</sup> my heart—  
their names  
should not survive their lives

except that I will Say them  
& That shall be their Accusation.—

#### IX. *Remarks*

1.

The fear is of exhaustion, going on, of arriving at a black gap that is called "respect."

2.

August 20, 1994. At the Baltimore Antiques Show and Antiquarian Book Fair, a dealer offers for sale a first edition of Bligh's *A Narrative of the Mutiny on Board His Majesty's Ship the Bounty and subsequent voyage of part of the crew in the ship's boat from Tofoa, one of the Friendly Islands, to Timor, a Dutch settlement in the East Indies, illustrated with charts*, London, G. Nicol, 1790. Price: \$5,000.

3.

Even before reaching England aboard a Dutch ship in the spring of 1790, Bligh had written a draft of his *Narrative* as well as many letters describing the mutiny & accusing those who took part in it. He arrived in Portsmouth before any of his letters or reports, & so “his superiors in the Admiralty heard from his lips what he had carefully rehearsed on paper” (MBBL 9).

4.

The final action recites.

#### X. Facsimile

14.

Rem.<sup>s</sup> 31<sup>s</sup>.<sup>t</sup> May 1789

Prayers.

I am done with eating & the gathering of oysters palm leaves a likely kind of lizard.—

Kind Providence protects us but it is a most unhappy situation to be in a Boat (the pork is stolen once again) among such discontented People who don't know what to be or what is best for them.

They have forgot the mercies they received.

It is time to leave. North.<sup>n</sup> land as seen from Rest.<sup>n</sup> Isl.<sup>d</sup> & is the same now & makes a fair Cape.

About 20 natives came down on the opposite after prayers & making signs & hollowing—we did not approach. I've seen the ends of men hugged by such entreaties. I will not

be dead—poor Norton, poor Cook his body washed all night at the waters edge.

15.

This is how they worship—

seven natives on the Main armed with Spear & another They made  
signs to come on shore—I did not choose

They waved branches of some Tree or Bush as sign of Friendship but  
there were others less friendly—I did not choose

a larger Party we saw coming—I did not choose

to be their god.—

Steered for an Isl.<sup>d</sup> further off From whence the Main bore WbN 3  
leag.<sup>s</sup> & Found water in a Hollow & an old

Canoe of three pieces with a sharp head a little carved to resemble a  
Fishes head I suppose would carry 20 Men—

This is how they travel.

16.

We see We see & then again we see  
nothing  
the shape of hope. A mast would be enough . . .

Christ.<sup>n</sup> is easy in the Belly of My Ship  
& still I survive—better

than the fears of those men—better than the dying Cook  
(his arms a cross  
the beach)—I am a better

man—This sextant & these eyes that can imagine  
an end which Is

the Where we did begin.—

No hope but cold & wet. These cloathes are wet this skin & this  
my heart  
to be but stuff for fish & yet I say

I am a better Christian

who won't Abandon wretched men . . .  
Strong Gales & Squally some Slight Showers.—  
(Star tatow He turned His back & set us a drift)  
I am a better  
Christ.<sup>n</sup>

A Sandy Isl<sup>d</sup> true East & much Sea about the Reef—

They worship me (we do not eat  
the flesh of men)

I am a better

#### XI. *Accusations*

1.

Of the ten mutineers who were returned to England & court-martialed, four were acquitted, three were hanged & three were convicted, sentenced to death, then pardoned. Fletcher Christian died violently on Pitcairn Island. Bligh, as Governor of New South Wales, suffered a rebellion which deposed him from office. On return to England, he was promoted ultimately to Vice-Admiral, but died in 1817 without ever having returned to sea.

2.

The event is not the story of its telling.

## NOTES

The "Facsimile" portions of this poem contain adaptations from William Bligh's entries in his notebook, published by the National Library of Australia in 1986 as *The Bligh Notebook: 'Rough account—Lieutenant Wm Bligh's voyage in the Bounty's Launch from the ship to Tofua & from thence to Timor'*, edited by John Bach.

Every quotation from a source other than Bligh is identified by a parenthetical reference which includes an abbreviation of the source's title & the relevant page number. Works cited or otherwise consulted are as follows:

Bach, John. Preface to *The Bligh Notebook*. Canberra, Australia: Nat'l. Library of Australia, 1986.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

Cook, James. *The Explorations of Captain James Cook in the Pacific as told by selections from his own Journals 1768-1779* (ECJC). Ed. by A. Grenfell Price. New York: Dover, 1971.

Dening, Greg. *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (MBBL). Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1992.

Moore, Thomas. *The Life of Lord Byron with His Letters and Journals* (LB). 2 vols. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846.

Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992.

Olson, Charles. *Call Me Ishmael* (CMI). San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1947.

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson* (P). New York: New Directions, 1963.