Introduction

The two central protagonists of the story of the *Bounty*—William Bligh and Fletcher Christian—hold an enduring place in the popular imagination. Both film and scholarship have portrayed one or the other as hero or villain of the mutiny, speculating on the biographical and historical factors that impelled their contest of authority. But a figure equally significant to the historiography of the mutiny remains much less well known.

James Morrison (1761–1807) entered the British Navy in 1779, aged eighteen, and signed on as boatswain’s mate of the *Bounty* on 9 September 1787, having previously served as midshipman on the sloop *Termagant*. Berths on the *Bounty* were highly sought after—hence Morrison’s willingness to take a demotion to petty officer in order to join the crew—as the ship was known to be voyaging, in the wake of England’s most famous navigator, James Cook, to the already mythologized island of Tahiti. Its subsequent destination was to be the Caribbean islands. West Indian planters had petitioned Joseph Banks, the most energetic and powerful scientific entrepreneur of the epoch,¹ to mandate transportation of breadfruit plants from the Pacific to the Caribbean, believing, from descriptions of the fruit’s loaf-like qualities, that it might offer a cheap substitute for wheaten bread in the diet of plantation slaves.²

The *Bounty*’s passage to Tahiti was not a smooth one: it took the ship almost ten months to arrive at its destination. After battling trade winds at Cape Horn for close to a month, it was eventually forced to turn back from the Cape Horn route and enter the Pacific via the Cape of Good Hope. This in turn resulted in further impediments when the crew members reached Tahiti: they had missed the appropriate season to take breadfruit cuttings and were required to make an extended sojourn of five months on the island before the plants could be established. The cuttings, for which Bligh had negotiated with Tina, the head of the powerful Pomare family, were cultivated in special transport boxes. When the *Bounty* finally left Tahiti on 4 April 1789, these were packed on board at great inconvenience to the
Figure 3. “The Breadfruit of Otahytrey,” George Tobin, 1792 [Call no. PXA 563 no. 2]. Reproduced with permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW
crew. The ship was only ninety-one feet long and twenty-three feet wide, and the great cabin and quarterdeck—the sections of the ship reserved for its commander and officers—were almost completely given over to the plants. This meant that different ranks of sailors had to berth together, creating an unusual degree of fraternity between officers and men.

The mutiny occurred on 28 April, not far from Tofua in the Tonga group. Bligh and eighteen crew members were put to sea in the *Bounty*’s launch. Twenty-five men remained on board the *Bounty*. Arguments were later to ensue over how willingly various individuals remained on board or entered the launch with Bligh, the nuances of which were to become life-and-death matters at the mutineers’ court martial. The launch made its way to Tofoa, where they encountered local hostility and one crew member, John Norton, sacrificed his life. Bligh decided to navigate to Kupang on the island of Timor rather than risk further violence in unknown territories. He divided the launch’s rations, suited to five days at sea, to serve a fifty-day passage. The launch reached Kupang in forty-eight days, with all the crew alive, though weakened (three soon perished at Kupang).

James Morrison was among those who stayed on the *Bounty* and joined Christian in his attempt to establish a settlement on the island of Tubuai. This failed due to local resistance, and the *Bounty* returned to Tahiti on 20 September 1789. Knowing that British efforts to capture the mutineers would inevitably first be directed toward Tahiti, Christian and a party of eight men remained there for only twenty-four hours before departing again in the *Bounty*, accompanied by nineteen women, a female child, and six men—three from Tahiti, two from Tubuai, and one from Ra‘iatea. Their destination was unknown to Morrison and the fifteen other crewmen who decided to stay on at Tahiti despite the insecurity their position entailed. They remained there for approximately a year and a half. On 23 March 1791, the ship *Pandora*, sent out by the British Admiralty under the captaincy of Edward Edwards to recapture the mutineers, caught up with them. All were rounded up or turned themselves in and were brutally imprisoned in a cell on the quarterdeck, nicknamed “Pandora's Box,” to be taken back to England for trial.

On the evening of 28 August, the *Pandora* struck the Great Barrier Reef at the entrance to Endeavour Straits. Morrison survived the wreck that killed four of the prisoners as well as thirty-one crew members and the ensuing open-boat journey of its survivors to Timor. He thus took
his place among ten men who were tried on board HMS *Duke* at Portsmouth Harbour for alleged participation in the mutiny. The others were Peter Heywood, midshipman; Joseph Coleman, armorer; Charles Norman, carpenter’s mate; Thomas McIntosh, carpenter’s crew; and the seamen Thomas Ellison, Thomas Burkitt, John Millward, William Muspratt, and Michael Byrn.

**Bearing Witness**

Morrison’s text is not only an eyewitness account of the events of the mutiny and life on Tahiti; it is also regarded as having played a direct role in the outcome of the court martial. It was apparently written up in 1792, first as its author awaited trial and then as he recuperated after receiving the king’s pardon. Some form of day-to-day notebook probably formed the basis of the final composition. Lady Belcher, in her *Mutineers of the “Bounty,”* mentions that Morrison kept notes of “daily occurrences from the period of the departure of the *Bounty* from England to his return as a prisoner.” While some scholars have questioned how this primary text could have survived the wreck of the *Pandora* on Morrison’s return voyage to London, a couple of explanations suggest themselves. The most obvious is that Morrison carefully secreted away or even memorized the basic text prior to his recapture, fearing that it would be appropriated or destroyed. Another is that this ur-text, even if it was lost, made Morrison’s eventual process of writing one of a particular type of recuperation, involving the recollection of a form of words or a set of images rather than the composition of an account. As Owen Rutter pointed out when first publishing Morrison’s work, there is internal evidence of both note taking and revision in the final document.

Whatever the relative degrees of on-the-spot and delayed composition, Morrison’s text has the impact and authority of an eyewitness report. Moreover, it is the only text with the heft to offer a real counterweight to Bligh’s two versions of the mutiny story, the brief *Narrative of the Mutiny, on board his Britannic Majesty’s ship Bounty: and the 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,* published in 1790; and the more extensive *A Voyage to the South Sea, undertaken by command of His Majesty, for the purpose of conveying the bread-fruit tree to the West Indies,* in
his Majesty's ship Bounty: commanded by Lieutenant William Bligh. Including an account of the mutiny on board the said ship, and the 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, published in 1792 while Bligh was at sea on his second breadfruit voyage.

Morrison's brief defense at the Bounty court martial also took the form of a “Paper Writing to the Court.” It was a document that consciously and repeatedly adverted to questions of readability. In addressing his accusers, Morrison drew a distinction between internal zeal and outward conduct, arguing that at times he had indeed played the part of enthusiastic mutineer, but that this was a role he assumed in the hope of regaining the ship for Bligh. He writes, “If there were No sorrow mark'd in my Countenance, it was to deceive those whose Act I abhorred, that I might be at liberty to seize the first Opportunity that might appear favourable, to the retaking of the Ship.” Motives, Morrison argued, are not transparent, and the most complex strategies and performances may be enacted in a virtuous cause. The good reader, his defense implies, must adjudicate between versions of a story by relating them to particular contexts of performance. Morrison’s Journal and Account may in one sense be seen to develop this theme, offering in turn a “story” and a “back story”—a narrative and its context—that require an interreferential mode of reading. But because the text remained unpublished until 1935, the effect it achieved was purely as a draft—as threatened publication and secret document. There is little question, however, that its existence, in whatever partial or rumored form, contributed to Morrison’s pardon. The work is thus not merely a record but an artifact of the Bounty mutiny: its writing was an event in that history.

At the time James Morrison was standing trial on board the HMS Duke, William Bligh was far away, completing the task that the mutiny had so disastrously interrupted. The court martial took place between 12 and 19 September 1792; at that time, Bligh’s new ships, the Providence and the Assistant, were en route from Tahiti. Having steered through the shoals of Torres Strait and along the coast of New Guinea, lost only three hundred and fifty-four of the breadfruit plants they transported, and retained close to a thousand, they made their way to Kupang before heading on to St. Helena, then to St. Vincent and Jamaica in the West Indies. Bligh’s “second breadfruit voyage” had been a relatively straightforward one. Soon after arriving in Tahiti, he had felt the need to interrogate Tina as to
his degree of involvement with the mutineers, and in particular about his friendship with Fletcher Christian. But he chose to be satisfied with Tina’s somewhat flimsy reassurances:

I asked him how he came to be so friendly to Christian, for that proved to me he was not sincere in what he said. He replied—“I really thought you was living and gone to England untill Christian came back the second time. I was then from home, but all my Friends, as soon as they heard from the Men who came on Shore, on their questioning them, that you was lost, from that time we did not profess any friendship to him, and Christian knew it so well that he only remained a few hours, and went away in such a hurry, that he left a second Anchor behind him. [. . .]” Thus he freed himself from any suspicion on my side, & with his usual good nature and cheerfulness regained my esteem & regard.9

The collecting of the breadfruit cuttings had this time been accomplished in just over three months. Bligh’s local relationships were consolidated, his observations more confident: his authority seemed assured. Yet there was a novel element of unsettlement in this notoriously fractious commander. He appeared to be afraid of others’ writings. Lieutenant Francis Godolphin Bond, first lieutenant of the Providence, reported after the voyage, in a letter to his brother, Bligh’s paranoia regarding the existence of alternative accounts of the mission:

Among many circumstances of envy and jealousy he used to deride my keeping a private journal, and would often ironically say he supposed I meant to publish. [. . .] Every officer who has nautical information, a knowledge of natural history, a taste for drawing, or anything to constitute him proper for circumnavigating, becomes odious; for great as he is in his own good opinion, he must have entertained fears some of his ship’s company meant to [submit] a spurious Narrative to the judgment and perusal of the publick.

Bond reports that he was admonished by Bligh: “No person can do the duty of a 1st Lieut. who does more than write the day’s work of his publick Journal.”10
To have set out to complete his breadfruit commission, rather than awaiting in person the capture of the mutineers and their trial, bespoke a certain confidence on Bligh’s part. It indicated that, although a task had been interrupted, his own role in that turn of events required no personal vindication. Yet Bligh’s attitude in print was less sanguine. He had in fact been in some haste to publish his version of the circumstances of the mutiny. His *Narrative of the Mutiny, on board his Britannic Majesty’s ship Bounty* was brought out hastily in 1790 and simply gave his account of the events of the mutiny and the open-boat journey to Kupang, his reception there, and his passage to England. In 1792 his second version of the story, *A Voyage to the South Sea*, was published, edited—in some places very freely—by his powerful friends James Burney and Joseph Banks. This second account drew on Bligh’s logbook to flesh out the earlier part of the *Bounty* voyage and the five-month stay at Tahiti that preceded the mutiny. It incorporated, with occasional significant emendation, the 1790 narrative of events immediately leading up to and following the mutiny.

Bligh’s anxiety to set the story straight before others could give their versions of it preceded Morrison’s recapture; it could not, therefore, have been prompted in an immediate way by knowledge of the existence of Morrison’s text. But did he have some memory of a note-taking boatswain’s mate harboring another account of events? One of the most striking details in Morrison’s narrative is its obsessive recording of weights and measures, of the ways in which Bligh appeared to be shortchanging his crew. Was this Morrison’s indirect response to Bligh during the *Bounty* voyage—to be seen as recording figures, and the exchanges surrounding them, for some future reckoning?

Bligh no doubt suspected that there were alternative reports to be feared from other members of the crew. One by the ship’s master, John Fryer, who had accompanied him in the launch, and with whom he had strained relations from early on in the *Bounty* voyage, seems to have been written shortly after he published the 1790 *Narrative*. Fryer’s eldest daughter later claimed that Fryer’s text had in fact been penned at Timor in 1789; however, it refers to and takes issue with Bligh’s published account and, as Rolf du Reitz has argued, “was written as a kind of commentary to the official version published by Bligh.” As well as presenting an unmitigatedly negative portrait of Bligh’s command, Fryer’s text offers a com-
panion image to Bond’s of Bligh as jealous guard of voyage records. Fryer explains the gaps in his own narrative as follows: “I must refer the reader to Captain Bligh’s narrative as I would only write the truth to the best of my knowledge and the best of my recollection as I had neither ink nor paper—Mr Bligh made all the necessary remarks—I steered and rowed in the Boat as any other man.” He continues, “when we came to Timor I asked Captain Bligh for a ruff copy of the Log for my own satisfaction and he refused to let me have it.”

Morrison’s Divided Text: Journal and Account

If Fryer’s account parallels Bligh’s 1790 narrative in reading as a hastily put together version of immediate events surrounding and following the mutiny written in angry self-vindication, Morrison’s Journal is a different kind of work. Like Bligh’s more extended 1792 Account, Morrison’s text offers a combination of self-exculpatory reporting on the voyage and mutiny and an account of Tahitian life and culture. Indeed, it is divided into two distinct types of text, named Journal and Account: a voyage narrative and a “life and customs” description of Tahiti. In this respect it reflects the structure of the typical voyaging account, which often combined two different modes of writing—diachronic and synchronic—in one. The first half of Morrison’s text appears to march through a sequence of events, and the second, to present a portrait of a society abstracted from time. The distinction between modes of discourse used to describe European events and non-European cultures was one of the bases of a late twentieth-century critique of the practice of ethnographic writing, which was seen as taking its subjects “out of time,” reserving historical understanding for Western societies. Yet the two sides of Morrison’s story, as we shall see, were codependent, and both were equally crucial to the historical outcome of his trial.

Morrison’s account of Tahiti, along with a vocabulary assembled by another acquitted mutineer, Peter Heywood, were quickly commandeered as part of the next great project of the British Empire in Tahiti and the Pacific. They had been given to the London Missionary Society director Samuel Greathede by Heywood, and the potential usefulness of these documents may have been instrumental in securing the King’s Pardon for these two accused mutineers. When the London Missionary Society ves-
sel the *Duff* set out on the inaugural British missionary voyage to Tahiti in 1796, the men and women on board made efforts to master “a manuscript vocabulary of the Otaheitean language” which the captain, James Wilson explained, had been “providentially [. . . ] preserved” during the fraught journey of the *Bounty* mutineers to England on the *Pandora*. In the “Instructions to Captain Wilson” the directors highlighted the pivotal importance of these texts to the mission: “We recommend to your attentive perusal the papers which have been committed to you [. . .]. To this subject belongs the consideration of the safety of our women, probability of introducing our improvements, supply of provisions, the products of the island in sugar, cotton, sandal-wood, &c.”13 The reprobate’s documents thus found themselves swiftly converted into potential instruments of paternalism and commerce.

Why was Morrison’s text immediately useful to the missionaries in a way that Bligh’s published 1792 account was not? Morrison detailed an experience of living among the Tahitians upon which the missionaries, too, were embarking. His observations were from the beach. Bligh, notoriously, did not spend a single night of the *Bounty’s* Tahitian sojourn ashore, though he was a scrupulous journalist. The mutineers, on the other hand, spent many nights ashore, forging relationships with members of the local communities of Matavai and Pare that were extensions of *taio* (bond friendship) relationships or liaisons with women, yet none other of these men seems to have recorded his experiences. Only Morrison both lived among the Tahitians and wrote of what he found. His observations were embedded whereas Bligh’s were detached. In fact, Morrison might be said to be the first European participant observer of Tahitian society. Much more than Bligh’s text, his can retrospectively claim the status of ethnography.

In both of his accounts, Bligh blames the mutineers’ daily and affective entanglement with the Tahitian people for the mutiny itself, suggesting that it was responsible for a shift of allegiance away from the ship and his command to the shore. Considering the causes of the mutiny, he writes, “it is now perhaps not so much to be wondered at, though scarcely possible to have been foreseen, that a set of sailors, most of them void of connections, should be led away; especially when, in addition to such powerful inducements, they imagined it in their power to fix themselves in the midst of plenty, on the finest island in the world, where they need not
labour, and where the allurements of dissipation are beyond anything that can be conceived.”14 This explanation draws on stereotypes of the South Sea Islands that had established themselves immediately in the wake of the first European voyages to Tahiti, and whose defining symbol was the breadfruit itself—bread that grew on trees. Whereas the breadfruit mission ironically exploited the symbolism of labor-free sustenance by seeking to feed breadfruit to unpaid laborers, Morrison’s own account from the outset, as mentioned earlier, is full of weights and measures and a clear sense of insufficient provision. In it, Bligh, who was purser as well as captain of his ship, is accused of profiting from the men’s rations. He is figured as a dodgy shopkeeper, giving short measure or poor substitutes—“pumpions” (pumpkins) in place of loaves, oil and sugar in place of butter and cheese. Though Morrison’s computations of day-to-day injustices very quickly take on an evidential tone, this in itself was part of the rhetoric of warrant and petty officers’ journals. George Robertson, master of the *Dolphin*, was equally forensic regarding issues of exchange between his ship’s crew and Tahitians, grumbling above all about the controlling attitude of First Lieutenant William Clarke, whom he referred to as “Growl” and “Lieut. Knowall.”

At Tahiti the battle over rations became a battle over local knowledge. It was Bligh’s second visit to the island; he had been there during Cook’s third, fatal voyage, on which he had served as master. Prior to arrival he posted a notice that set out a script and stage directions for his crew’s interactions on Tahiti. It was closely based on the Admiralty Instructions that were the template for Cook’s three voyages, but differed in the degree of specificity proposed regarding projected exchanges and in the level of duplicity he insisted on in dealing with Tahitians:

_rules to be observed by every person on board, or belonging to the “bounty,” for the better establishing a trade for supplies or provisions and good intercourse with the natives of the south sea, wherever the ship may be at._

_1st. At the society, or friendly islands, no person whatever is to intimate that captain cook was killed by indians; or that he is dead._

_2d. No person is ever to speak, or give the least hint, that we have come on purpose to get the bread-fruit plant, until I have made my plan known to the chiefs._
3d. Every person is to study to gain the good will and esteem of the natives; to treat them with all kindness; and not to take from them by violent means, any thing they may have stolen; and no one is ever to fire, except in defence of his life.

4th. Evry person employed on service is to take care that no arms, or implements of any kind under their charge, are stolen; the value of such thing, being lost shall be charged against their wages.

5th. No man is to embezzle, or offer to sale, directly, or indirectly, any part of the King’s stores, of what nature soever.

6th. A proper person or persons will be appointed to regulate trade, and barter with the natives; and no officer or seaman, or other person belonging to the ship, is to trade for any kind of provisions, or curiosities; but if such officer or seaman wishes to purchase any particular thing, he is to apply to the provider to do it for him. By this means a regular market will be carried on, and all disputes, which otherwise may happen with the natives, will be avoided. All boats are to have everything handed out of them at sun-set.

Given under my hand, on board the “Bounty”, Otaheite, 25th Oct. 1788.

Wm. BLIGH

Once again, Bligh reveals himself here as a policer of alternative accounts, seeking to restrict in advance terms of interaction that he would later concede eluded his grasp and may have been a cause of the mutiny. The excessiveness of his attempt to preempt and control forms of contact was something even he admitted, writing: “I had given directions to every one on board not to make known to the islanders the purpose of our coming, lest it might enhance the value of the bread-fruit plants, or occasion other difficulties. Perhaps so much caution was not necessary, but at all events I wished to reserve to myself the time and manner of communication.”

Morrison gives a number of examples throughout the journal section of his work of ways in which crew members, as they advanced in intimacy with and concomitantly gained knowledge of Tahitians, worked against the script that Bligh had laid down for their interactions. He describes, for instance, how the sailors’ Tahitian friends joined in the ongoing fight for food, helping the crew to manipulate Bligh’s rationing and undermine his authority:
The Market for Hogs beginning now to slacken Mr. Bligh seized on all that came to the ship big & small Dead or alive, taking them as his property, and serving them as the Ship’s allowance at one pound pr. Man pr. Day. He also seized on those belonging to the Master, & killd them for the ships use, tho He had more then 40 of different sizes on board of his own, and there was then plenty to be purchaced nor was the price much risen since the first, and when the Master spoke to him, telling him the Hogs were his property, he told him that “He Mr. Bligh would convince him that evry thing was his, as soon as it was on board, and that He would take nine tenths of any mans property and let him see who dared say any thing to the contrary”, those of the seamen were seized without ceremony, and it became a favour for a Man to get a Pound extra of His own hog—

The Natives observing that the Hogs were seized as soon as they Came on board, and not knowing but they would be seized from them, as well as the People, became very shy of bringing a hog in sight of Lieut. Bligh either on board or on shore, and watched all opportunitys when he was on shore to bring provisions to their friends on board but as Mr. Bligh observed this, and saw that His diligence was like to be evaded, he ordered a Book to be kept in the Bittacle wherein the Mate of the Watch was to insert the Number of Hogs or Pigs with the Weight of each that came into the Ship, to remedy this, the Natives took another Method which was Cutting the Pigs up, and wraping them in leaves and covering the Meat with Bread fruit in the Baskets, and sometimes with peeld Cocoa Nuts, by which means, as the Bread was never seized, they were a Match for all his industry; and he never suspected their artifice, by this means provisions were still plenty.

Morrison here asserts the right of crew members as well as captains to accumulate personal rather than just communal property on the basis of individual connections they forged on the beach. He figures the sailors as able to draw on intimacies for sustenance, even while Bligh waved his book of accounts. Despite Bligh’s care in managing the breadfruit transactions, false measure is shown here to have been smuggled into loads of breadfruit.

Another, punning example of the value of “local knowledge” is to
be found in the codes and practices of sexual exchange that developed between crew members and Tahitians but excluded the abstinent Bligh. Early on, Morrison gives a pointed description of the crew’s “easy” friendships with Tahitians: “evry officer & Man in the ship were provided with new friends tho none understood the language, yet we found it very easy to Converse by signs at which these people are adepts, and some of the Weomen who came on board became very Intiligent in a short time and soon brought their quondum husbands into a method of discourse by which evry thing was transacted.” The notion of intelligence is crucial here, connoting a kind of experiential knowledge that, as with the smuggling of meat under breadfruit, allowed for transactions that bypassed official orders. Such repeated scenarios make an implicit argument in Morrison’s text—namely, that questions of command play themselves out in the ethnographic arena. In this sense, the division of his work into *Journal* and *Account* is arbitrary: both sections are a form of testimony, grounded in the assumption that an embedded local knowledge makes the only valid claim to authority in cross-cultural contexts.

The *Journal* and the *Account* are interrelated in a further sense, the former offering contexts for the purportedly decontextualized knowledge offered in the latter—weaving it back into story—and the account of “customs” equally serving as an extended footnote to various scenarios sketched in the narrative. Take the friendships that figure as significantly imbricated with different forms of trade in both the anecdotes above. The *Account* lays out clearly the specificities of Tahitian ritualized friendship formation.

When a Man adopts a Friend for his Son the Ceremonie is the same, only placing the Boy in the place of the Woman, the Ceremonie is ratified, and the boy & his friends exchange Names and are ever after lookd as one of the Family the New Friend becoming the adopted son of the Boys Father—this Friendship is most religiously kept, and never disolves till Death, tho they may separate, and make temporary Friends while absent, but when they meet, they always acknowledge each other—

While Morrison draws a comparison between male friendship rituals and heterosexual marriage rituals in Tahiti, friendship appears to be indis-
soluble in a way that marriage is not, binding the partners in a lifelong commitment to support one another and their families in times of need:

And should a Brother or one who is an adopted friend become poor or loose his land in War, he has nothing more to do but go to his Brother, or Friend, and live with him partaking of all he possesses as long as he lives & his wife and Family with him if he has any—or if any relation or Friend tho not in immediate want, comes to the House of his Friend, he is always fed while he stays and is Not only welcome to take away what he pleases but is loaded with presents—

It is only by reading this section of the Account that we can understand the way in which retributive justice is operating in the report Morrison provides in the Journal of the deaths of Churchill and Thompson in Tahiti. Morrison traces the ways in which local taio bonds led to a falling out between the two beachcombers. Thompson and Churchill moved to the district of Taiarapu with John Brown, a violent beachcomber who had been left at Matavai by the Mercury. Morrison tells of various allegiances and bitternesses that reconfigured the loyalties of the trio, until finally Thompson “resolved to Shoot Churchill, which He put into execution immediately on his return, for which the Natives had put him to Death.” The account is a bald and opaque one until it is read in the light of Morrison’s later description of friendship bonds. Both Churchill and Thompson had befriended powerful arir (district chiefs) at Taiarapu. However, when Vehiatua, Churchill’s taio, dies, Churchill’s status as an embodiment of Vehiatua’s identity, which had been instigated by their exchange of names, becomes manifest. This affects the European friends Churchill and Thompson—that is, their former equality as crew members is destabilized by the sanctioned appropriation by one mutineer of the identity of high-ranking chief. The story, like Morrison’s text itself, also plays a role within the broader narrative of the mutiny and trial, where Churchill and Thompson are consistently figured as the most reprobate and unequivocal of the accused mutineers. As William Bligh was to put it when reflecting on their careers, “these two Villains affected their own destruction, and avoided the punishment that awaited them.” Thus, ironically, they were free to become the focus of blame cast by other men seeking to avoid a different fate.
Material objects, not just human subjects, come into focus between the texts of the *Journal* and the *Account*. Morrison’s discussions of both “Fruits” and “Manufactures and Traffic” in the *Account*, for instance, enable us to appreciate the ways in which local practices and European models came together in the construction of the boat described in the *Journal*. The process is depicted by Morrison as one of substitution, its main work being the location of local equivalents for familiar metropolitan tools and techniques: “the Purau answerd for the Shells of the Blocks, and the Toa for Shievs & Pins. The Bark of the Purau being Cleand made very good rope. . . .” Once again like Morrison’s text itself, the boat has a complex evidential status. He claimed it was built to return the Tahitian party to England, an act that would presuppose their innocence. Captain Edwards, on the other hand, understood it to have been used as a means to avoid recapture and referred to the vessel as “the pirate schooner.” Morrison, on his part, claims that the mutineers employed the boat only as a means of temporary escape once the *Pandora* arrived, so that they might retrieve agency by turning themselves in rather than being taken to the ship under arrest. Yet he also informs us that his own desire to use the boat to return to England had to be concealed from the majority of the party at Tahiti: “we resolved to keep the real motive a Secret, and to Say that she was only for the purpose of Pleasuring about the Island.” Thus the boat becomes a relic, not just of cross-cultural ingenuity, but of the complex ingenuities of storytelling and witness bearing.

Precisely because the *Journal* and the *Account* work together so tightly, the section of Morrison’s *Journal* that covers the two visits made by the mutineers to Tubuai and their attempt to establish a fortified colony there reads as the most undernourished part of the work—and this is reflected in the relatively minor use hitherto made of it in contemporary Pacific scholarship. One of the most significant aspects of this edition is that it offers, in its comprehensive annotations, an “Account of the Island of Tubuai” that aims to give commensurate substance to the Tubuaian experience. Morrison’s ethnohistorical observations upon this island are of special importance because there is no further account of it until 1827 (the unpublished journal of the conchologist Cuming); later documentation and discussion are also very sparse, consisting mainly of reports by missionaries belonging to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and
Mary (the Catholic order active in eastern Polynesia) and Aitken’s rather slight 1930 *Ethnology of Tubuai*.

**Morrison as Ethnographer and Historian**

The “Account” has long been recognized as a foundational source for the culture and society of Tahiti, and of the Society Islands more generally. In the corpus of early sources, drawn upon by ethnohistorians and anthropologists concerned to reconstruct and analyze the indigenous cultures of the place, it falls between the set of voyage accounts from the 1760s and 1770s—of Cook, his immediate predecessors, and his contemporaries—and the archive of the London Missionary Society dating from the establishment of the Tahitian mission in March 1797.

All of these sources provide rich and uneven materials for the study of early Polynesia. None, strictly speaking, documents a “traditional” culture, the Holy Grail of salvage anthropology. True, a good deal can be said about what was happening and what Tahitian social relations were like on the eve of European contact in 1767. But it is clear that considerable change was under way in closely intertwined ritual and political affairs in the Society Islands, and that the situation at that time differed from those ten, or fifty, years earlier. The eve of contact possesses no special authenticity that earlier or later times lack. That said, the early contact period and what can be known of pre-European history remain of particular interest to many Polynesians themselves, as well as to scholars from a variety of disciplines: the records that relate to this period are indeed of unique importance and demand special scrutiny.

For Tahiti the voyage records are rich for two particular reasons. First, and with respect to the Cook voyages specifically, there was an accumulation of experience. Observations made during Samuel Wallis’s inaugural British visit in the *Dolphin* (1768) gave Cook and others certain bearings when they arrived in the *Endeavour* in 1769; what was learned during that extended visit was complemented by new information gleaned during the second and third voyages. There was an overlap of personnel—some men had sailed with Wallis and on one or more of Cook’s voyages; others participated in two or even all three of his expeditions. Familiarity and linguistic competence grew. If none of the mariners ever acquired a sophisticated fluency in Tahitian, some could certainly converse about a
wide range of topics. Second, the parties included natural historians such as Banks, and Johann Reinhold and George Forster (who accompanied Cook’s second voyage), who were trained to observe and eager to make the fullest observations they could. Not only did they write extensively, but they set certain standards and encouraged others to describe whatever aspects of Polynesian life they could in a detailed fashion.

The voyage accounts also had their limitations. Most obviously they arose from relatively short visits; the *Endeavour*’s sojourn of three months in order to observe the Transit of Venus was important but exceptional. These periods, as Morrison points out, were, from the Polynesian perspective, highly unusual, both festive and busy. The mariners enjoyed frequent contact with Islanders—though visits were marked also by tension and temporary estrangement—but they never really witnessed the ordinary flow of life. Their observations are sound as far as they go, and surprisingly full in certain areas. Specific practices that attracted European attention, such as tattooing, were described precisely. Some sense of Polynesian political relationships was obtained, and this information remains of tremendous importance; but the cultural rationale, a genuine grasp of the meanings that informed practices and relationships, largely eluded these observers.

The missionaries arrived in Tahiti six years after Morrison left. Some soon abandoned the station, and others withdrew either to Huahine or Sydney during periods of conflict, but there is a continuous record of observation, engagement, and writing over the subsequent decades that in due course informed such systematic works as William Ellis’s *Polynesian Researches* (1829) and John Davies’s *History of the Tahitian Mission* (unpublished until 1961). These records have strengths and limitations quite different from those of the voyage journals and accounts. Those missionaries who did stay on for extended periods worked hard at learning the language—they needed to do so in order to preach and teach, and to translate scriptures. A few who were genuinely curious made sustained efforts to inquire into customs and beliefs. And J. M. Orsmond recorded many genealogies, chants and myths that were, over a number of decades, put in order by his granddaughter, Teuira Henry, and published thirteen years after her death as *Ancient Tahiti* (1928); the historiographic complexity of this text is reflected in its having no less than five prefaces!

The most commonly cited issue with missionary sources is their preju-
dice against non-Christian belief, and evangelists did rail against superstition and characterize local rites as irrational and barbaric. The commitment intrinsic to the mission, however, had an uneven impact upon the value of their observations from an ethnohistorical perspective. Some missionaries indeed completely lacked interest or understanding, but others were anthropologically minded and left aside the polemic when they wrote about “manners and customs” for their personal interest or in papers circulated privately. (Later in the nineteenth century, many went on to publish in anthropological journals and to identify themselves as anthropologists.) But all this is less important than the fact that Tahiti changed profoundly over the twenty years between 1790 and 1810. Introduced disease caused a considerable loss of population and customary knowledge. There were major political changes, already mentioned, that are well known, but also a whole range of more particular reorientations of behavior and practice that are difficult to specify. Most of the people the missionaries dealt with in, say, 1800 would not have been born, or were very young, at the time of Wallis’s “discovery” of the island. They were of a generation that had grown up with contact and with the new order that contact had both pervasively damaged and energized. Hence, notwithstanding its profound importance—not least as a set of sources for the process of conversion to Christianity itself—the missionary archive is not truly an archive of early Tahitian culture.

Morrison was not the first resident observer. That distinction belongs to the Spanish missionaries established at Vaitepiha by Domingo Boechea, together with their servant Maximo Rodriguez, though the mission was a failure and the priests enjoyed only limited rapport with Islanders. Rodriguez did interact to a greater extent with Tahitians, and his extant account is of interest, but he lacked either the inclination or the ability to write extensively, and unlike some subsequent beachcombers, he was not working with an educated writer who could elicit and articulate, or at least transcribe, his understanding. (The 1818 Account of the Tongan Islands, based on William Mariner’s communications, exemplifies the productivity of such partnerships.)

In this respect, James Morrison is exceptional. He prepared an extensive manuscript, evidently without editorial assistance. He was literate, and his writing is in no sense awkward; he had the vocabulary he needed to express what he wanted to say. Yet his writing is workmanlike rather
than literary. It is devoid of literary or classical allusion or showy gesture. The details of his social background are unclear, but he was certainly not from an aristocratic family, and his education may be presumed to have been basic, his reading probably primarily of the Bible. This last is important in one respect. There is no internal evidence that Morrison had read much of what had been previously published relating to Pacific peoples. In this respect he differs from many of the voyage writers who came before and after him. In contrast, Cook, the Forsters, and their successors studied compilations of voyages such as those published by Alexander Dalrymple and wrote in terms influenced by them or in opposition to them. It is likely that officers on an exploratory voyage to the Pacific all did a bit of reading, and it is clear that Morrison had at some point read either the official narratives published by Hawkesworth, Cook, and Cook and King for the navigator’s first, second, and third voyages respectively, or some collected edition or abridgement of them. That reading, however, seems not to have been fresh in his mind at the time he wrote his own “Account,” when very likely he had no access to a library.

This could be seen as one of the text’s major strengths. Morrison would seem to match an ideal of an empirical ethnographer: he wrote on the basis of his own observations and experiences; he did not reproduce others’ descriptions; nor was he sidetracked by arguments concerning others’ mistakes. But this is not to say that he did not bring a good deal of baggage to his description of Tahiti. The exposition is broadly shaped by the conventions of natural history in dealing with topography, plants, animals, and other matters before progressing to questions of government, social relationships, and customs. This was to adhere, however loosely, to conventions of European descriptive writing. These terms implied a set of Western understandings of the relationships between political communities and the natural world—understandings that were profoundly different from and alien to those of Islanders in the period. Yet if this is so at the level of the organization of the “Account,” Morrison in fact describes plant life from the perspective of Tahitian life: his botany is an ethnobotany replete with a sense of how plants and trees are used—as foods, as materials out of which artifacts are made, and so on. His writing does not mirror an indigenous understanding (how could it?), but he does foreground an inhabited island world, and the human use of that world.

It is worth flagging another aspect of the relationship between Mor-
rison’s text and its predecessors and successors. If we assume that in its writing the author was largely uninfluenced by earlier observations, its long-unpublished status means, conversely, that subsequent writers were uninfluenced by it. Neither Ellis nor Dumont d’Urville, nor Moerenhout nor any other nineteenth-century writer on Tahitian history, it appears, had knowledge or sight of Morrison’s “Account.” This means that where his remarks agree with those made later, this amounts at best to genuine corroboration, at worst to convergent misinterpretation.

All this is to argue for the strength of the “Account” as an ethnohistorical and anthropological source. Morrison had axes to grind in relation to behavior on board the *Bounty*; he did not have interests in producing any particular image of Polynesian life. He was not trying to argue, as was Cook in Tongatapu, for an implicitly Christian or at least monotheistic set of beliefs; nor like Forster senior was he trying to fashion a particular understanding of a semicivilized society. Much of what he wrote concerns specific events or practices that he witnessed, or that he well understood. His account is largely matter-of-fact and unsensational.

But there are two important domains in which Morrison’s renderings of Tahitian life and culture have to be seen as genuinely problematic. The first, and most extreme, is that of religious belief. Notwithstanding the quality and—so far as can be judged—accuracy of the accounts of specific rites and ritual artifacts, the short section in which Morrison deals with Tahitian gods, ideas of spirits, and notions of the afterlife is an awkward amalgam of Christian models and his notions of classical religion. This is the only section of the entire text that would have to be described as genuinely scrambled, as a poor guide to the cosmology it describes.

The second area in which there are issues is that of Tahitian government and social hierarchy. Here the situation is less clear-cut. Morrison uses terms loosely based on European feudal relationships, but he tends to qualify them through use. Any crude application of a European model would certainly be misleading. Polynesian land tenure, for example, was layered, entailing titular sovereignty founded on ritual responsibility as well as use rights. Relationships between chiefs and people were constituted through various forms of reciprocity. Morrison does not fully explicate these contrasts in the manner a modern scholar would be expected to do, but the situated character of his language—that is, its embeddedness in accounts of particular people and events—does a good deal to
convey the distinctiveness of the Polynesian order. The issue is further complicated by scope for debate about both the nature of Society Islands relationships—these are not clearly or unambiguously documented in any source, so there is room for much argument about them—and, for that matter, about the nature of European feudal polities. If the latter are subtly analyzed, as Valerio Valeri has done, it may be argued that there are in fact a host of interesting analogies with Polynesian societies. This is only to say that this source is rich and needs to be carefully read. It has limitations, but neither an old-fashioned historical idea of “bias” nor a broad category such as “colonial discourse” is particularly helpful in identifying them.

Perhaps the last of the *Bounty*’s ironies of authorization lies in the fact that our only surviving physical description of Morrison comes from Bligh. When he reached Kupang at the end of his arduous open-boat journey after being put to sea following the mutiny, Bligh had drawn up a list, “made out from the recollection of the persons with me, who were best acquainted with their private marks,” to assist with the eventual roundup of the mutineers. Even before he had sought to fix his own version of the mutiny in the public imagination through the publication of his two accounts, Bligh attempted to establish the mutineers forever as characters in his story rather than tellers of their own tales. Among the brief portraits he penned was the following:

James Morrison, boatswain’s mate, aged twenty-eight years, five feet eight inches high, sallow complexion, long black hair, slender made; has lost the use of the upper joint of the forefinger of the right hand; tattooed with a star under his left breast, and a garter round his left leg, with the motto of “Honi soit qui mal y pense”; and has been wounded in one of his arms with a musket-ball.

Marks of injury and tattooing are used to identify most of the mutineers, many of the latter, including Fletcher Christian’s, in the Tahitian mode. Morrison’s star, garter, and motto, however, are emphatically British. They are emblems of the Order of the Garter, the medieval chivalric order headed by the Prince of Wales, whose members wear a garter with the words “Honi soit qui mal y pense” (Evil to him who evil thinks) emblazoned upon it in gold lettering. Nevertheless, in his description
Bligh enumerates each symbol in dissociated form, refusing to read the tattooed insignia as one unit, thus recognizing its reference to the British Order. Instead, the separate symbols are presented simply as figures of tattooing, that eminently Oceanic practice, not particularly distinguishable from, for instance, arch-mutineers Fletcher Christian’s and George Stewart’s combination of a star on the left breast and Tahitian-style tattooing “on the backside,” or from John Millward’s description as “very much tattooed in different parts of the body, and under the pit of the stomach, with a *taoomy* of Otaheite.” Yet, like his written defense and his *Journal* and *Account*, Morrison’s tattoo seems to resonate in different registers, allowing him to masquerade either as the most loyal of British subjects or as an ironic commentator on British hierarchies. The only thing that is fully clear is his capacity to speak in two ways, using the insights and practices that his experience in crossing the beach had made available to him.