

# DARK PARADISE

- NORFOLK ISLAND -  
ISOLATION, SAVAGERY, MYSTERY  
AND MURDER



ROBERT MACKLIN

Author of the bestselling *SAS Sniper*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# The uneasy past

All nations lie about their past.

The Japanese, for example, are notorious for the official euphemisms that cloak their atrocities in the Second World War. The Turks threaten their own people with death if they tell the truth about the Armenian genocide. The Israelis justify the savage oppression of their fellow Palestinian Semites with the claim that their God granted them a particular piece of real estate. The Americans attribute demigod status to their Founding Fathers, not least the slave-owning sexual predator Thomas Jefferson, and habitually invoke the blessing of *their* God for the most arrogant of their military adventures. Australians are no better – for 200 years they have denied the very existence of the frontier wars that ripped to pieces the oldest continuous living culture the world has known. But in this they have learned well from their progenitors, the true masters of historical mendacity: the British imperium.

No nation has been so successful in disguising and distorting the reality of its colonial brutality as the British. The fiction that they are to be praised for having brought 'civilisation' to the ignorant and backward masses within the empire is not just an article of faith in Britain today, it has received a general – if impressionistic – acceptance in the Western world and even among its erstwhile victims. The plunder and pillage of vast areas of Africa, for example, is set against the depravity of the Portuguese in Angola or the Belgians in Congo and found to be relatively benign. The crime against humanity that was Britain's attempt to turn an entire nation of Chinese into opium addicts – and to enforce the outrage with Indian militia – has been forgiven, if not forgotten, by a magnanimous China. The Indians themselves have consigned the splitting of their country into two warring states to historical wonderland and prosecuted two wars (with more to come) between the divided states with irrepressible enthusiasm. And even the Americans, who were forced to conduct two separate wars of independence in 1776 and 1812 to escape the British oppressor, now rejoice in a famously 'special' relationship.

The British propaganda campaign has been unremitting and astonishingly successful. The image makers have surpassed all possible expectations. They have created the world's perception of Britain as the mother of democracy despite the fact that it remains a bastion of aristocratic privilege. And in a bewildering paradox the campaigners have even engaged the comic opera of its hereditary monarchy as an earnest example of its commitment to the democratic system.

It has played the underdog brilliantly in two world wars despite its leading role in prosecuting the first and by its vindictiveness

at the peace talks in Versailles creating the conditions that gave rise to the second. It has made a soaring international hero of Winston Churchill, whose madcap schemes caused the needless death of 8,000 Australians and many more of his fellow countrymen at Gallipoli and similar disasters in Norway and Dieppe in the second great conflict. Churchill is celebrated as the saviour of democracy, whereas the reality is that the war was won by the overwhelming power and resources of the United States and the Soviet Union.

It helped the image makers' cause that Churchill himself wrote history (which valued sentiment above scholarship) and that his principal antagonist was a homicidal maniac beside whom Churchill's faults seem inconsequential. And of course he was on the side of right.

It was the Second World War that marked the effective end of the British Empire, and victory allowed it to sanitise its centuries of cruel colonial oppression within the sanctimonious narrative that the world has come to accept. It has also helped that humanity's attention span is short and becoming shorter by the decade.

All of which goes some way to explain why one striking element of the narrative has never before been fully explored and understood as the *sine qua non* of the savagery that underpinned the British Empire. And it is to be found in the most unlikely setting: a tropical paradise, an emerald isle in a vast ocean of the deepest blue, surrounded and protected by natural rock walls, a haven for birds on their great migratory journeys, a nesting place free of predators, a perfect climate rarely touched by the great cyclonic swirls that thunder and carve their way across the Pacific to the north and east; a tiny place, less than 9,000

acres (3,600 hectares) of heart-shaped land, forested in parts, park-like in others with clear freshwater streams tumbling from its heights to cascade down a final slope and into the sea.

We know it now as Norfolk Island. And indeed it was the folk from the north – the British in the person of another of their flawed colonial heroes, the Yorkshireman James Cook – who in 1774 discovered and named it for a woman who, unbeknown to him, was already decomposing within an aristocratic tomb. Over the next 200 years it would host all the horrors that man’s ingenuity could visit upon his fellows. So terrible have they been that even today a resident would confide to me in an unguarded moment, ‘I have to tell you – Satan lives here.’

However, while the actors in the drama to follow are almost invariably British, and engaged in horrific and outrageous excesses against their fellow man, there is no intention to gratuitously traduce British colonial rule. There are wider issues at stake. While my account will, I trust, explode the myth of British benevolence, it is designed only to reveal that there is no justification for the posturing of superiority by any nation. We are all vulnerable to the urgings of the darker angels. We are all capable of the most appalling behaviour. We can never relax our vigilance as governments use ever more effective technology to manipulate sentiment and pervert our inherent sense of natural justice.

What follows is a story like no other, since it incorporates three distinct yet inseparable tales – the convict settlements that plumbed the depths of human malevolence; the mutiny on the *Bounty* and its lurid and little known aftermath; and finally the High Anglican Melanesian Mission in all its arrogance, violence, sexual predation and ultimate futility. Together they boast a

cast of characters ranging from the most high-minded to the vilest ever to have walked the earth, all playing their parts in a setting that today is steeped in controversy and at the brink of total collapse. However, there is hope. It is just possible that this cursed isle will at last find redemption.

The obvious place to begin is on the bluff overlooking the seeming infinity of the Pacific Ocean as Captain Cook's converted North Sea collier, the sloop *HMS Resolution*, hoves into view. Cook is on the homeward leg of his three-year expedition to discover the fabled Great South Land – or *Terra Australis Incognita* – as its champion, Alexander Dalrymple, termed it. Sadly for Dalrymple, the first hydrographer of the Admiralty, Cook's search as far south as the Antarctic Circle and then in a giant rough rectangle around the South Pacific had blown the Scottish-born geographer's fancy to the four winds.

Not that Cook was unduly perturbed. Dalrymple was a rival for the Admiralty's favours and had sought to command the expedition himself. In the British hierarchy of the day, he had a head start through his mother's family connections. She was the daughter of the Earl of Haddington while Cook's mother Grace Pace was no one at all, except to the three surviving children of her marriage to his father, also James, a Scottish day labourer who had fled his native land following the Jacobean uprising of 1715.

Cook was that rarest of commodities in the British Navy of the time, having won his preferment largely by merit, although even he depended on the good graces of the immensely wealthy Sir Joseph Banks, whose great grandfather had made the family fortune as a real estate agent for the aristocracy of Lincolnshire. Banks had accompanied him on his first voyage to the Pacific

during which he charted the east coast of Australia and claimed it for Britain, despite the obvious presence of a human population already in possession.

Cook first sighted them on the shore at Bawley Point on the far south coast of what would become New South Wales as his HMS *Endeavour* – another converted collier – buffeted its way north. From a distance, Cook wrote, ‘They appear’d to be of a very dark or black Colour but whether this was the real colour of their skins or the C[lo]thes they might have on I know not.’<sup>1</sup>

Happily for Cook and his masters, it turned out to be the former. This immediately disqualified them from fully human status, much less the right of possession of the land they had transformed over 60,000 years to ‘the biggest estate on earth’.<sup>2</sup> However, this was no special failing in Cook’s humanitarian perceptions. It had been ingrained in British Government policy since 1562 when a predecessor, Captain John Hawkins, undertook the first of three journeys carrying black slaves from Africa to the Spanish colonies in the Americas.

That was just a foretaste of a massive official enterprise. In the next 250 years, Britain would mount no fewer than 10,000 voyages trading in dark-skinned human beings, most to support their sugar plantations in Barbados and other British West Indian colonies. By 1760, only a decade before Cook’s Australian sighting, Britain had clearly overtaken its Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch competitors to become the foremost European slave trader. Of the 85,000 Africans traded each year, 42,000 were carried in British ships and in such appalling conditions that often a quarter of them failed to survive the journey.

But this was of little moment in an economic bonanza that returned £4 million annually to His Majesty’s Government’s

coffers from the plantations compared with only a quarter of that figure from all the other colonies combined. It financed not only the massive and obscenely wasteful mansions of the principals still proudly maintained as British heritage buildings, but also the Industrial Revolution that would extend Britain's imperial primacy for another 100 years.

Industrialisation would in turn create a massive metropolitan underclass in its own society.<sup>3</sup> These restless unfortunates would be held in check by the most draconian code of laws since Draco himself. And if they transgressed – as inevitably they did – those who escaped the frayed and sweat-soaked hangman's noose would be transported in similar conditions to the colonies, albeit with the distant prospect of eventually rejoining the white brotherhood and becoming slave owners themselves.

Cook's first voyage in the *Endeavour* would turn out to be fortuitous after George Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776 and led his American rebels to victory in the Battle of Trenton. With America no longer available as a convict dumping ground, the Great Navigator's discovery would provide a splendid alternative.

But that iconic battle was still two years away when the *Resolution* hove to among the rocky outcrops just off the north-west tip of Norfolk Island. It must have been a rare tranquil day as Cook joined his naturalists, the German Lutheran Pastor Johann Reinhold Forster, his son George and the botanist William Wales in the ship's boat that landed on the pebbled shore in the early afternoon. The Forsters were last-minute substitutes for Banks. He had wanted to bring an entourage and added an additional upper deck and a raised poop deck to the *Resolution* to accommodate them. However, sea trials had

revealed the ship to be top heavy, so the Admiralty designed more modest quarters. Banks found them quite unsuitable to his station and withdrew. The substitution of the lesser qualified naturalists would be pivotal to the unfolding horrors ahead.

It appears that the party roamed the island for a single afternoon, but this was long enough for Wales to identify a species of wild flax that they all agreed would provide the raw material for canvas sails. Even better, the great pine trees that abounded in the forested areas would make for magnificent masts and spars. This was a stunning discovery. Until then, both commodities had to be imported to Britain from Riga on Russia's Baltic coast, 1,000 insecure kilometres from Portsmouth and a world away from the colonies in the Far East. As Cook recorded, 'I know of no island in the South Pacifick where a ship could supply herself with a Mast or a Yard, was she ever so distress'd for want of one . . . the discovery may be both useful and valuable.'

And with that he sailed away. However, he carried with him in Forster Sr's journal a passage that provides an equally significant thread in the Norfolk tapestry. On their outward journey they had visited Tahiti where Cook was regarded with godlike awe since his initial landing there in the *Endeavour*. When the scores of canoes brought a happy, uninhibited crowd of frolicsome maidens aboard to welcome his return, the stern Lutheran pastor was almost undone. And when they went ashore the carnal delights sent his poor heart into overdrive with sights of the Tahitians and the sailors 'exercising themselves in the grassy fields of sport, wrestling on the yellow sand, others to the left and right feasting on the grass amid a scented grove of

laurel, whence the mighty stream of Erydanus rolls through the woodland in the upper world’.

Son George was nowhere to be seen.

Their sister ship HMS *Adventure*, under Commander Tobias Furneaux, would take aboard a splendid young Tahitian, Omai of Ra’iatea, who would spend two years in England – much of it sporting in the beds of fashionable ladies – before Cook himself would return him to his home on his third and fatal voyage.<sup>4</sup> His sailing master on that journey would be one William Bligh.

The *Resolution* reached Portsmouth on 30 July 1775, and Cook was promoted, somewhat belatedly, to captain, and at 47 reluctantly accepted honorary retirement as an officer at Greenwich Hospital. From there he published his journal to great acclaim. He was showered with honours as a member of the Royal Society and awarded the Copley Gold Medal. But he was restless. ‘A few months ago,’ he wrote to a friend,<sup>5</sup> ‘the whole Southern Hemisphere was hardly big enough for me, and now I am to be confined within the limits of Greenwich Hospital, which are far too small for an active mind like mine.’

He resumed married life with Elizabeth, nee Batts, the daughter of a Wapping tavern owner, and produced a sixth child, George, in 1776, but he was restless in spirit and yearned for the open sea, a stout ship and most particularly the omnipotence of command. On land in England, Cook was never allowed to forget his humble birth and mendicant status in the hierarchy. But out there among the elements he was the font of all power, the final unquestioned and unquestionable authority. It was a heady mix and Cook relished it as much as any, and more than most.

But the loneliness of command also had its darker side, and the bluff Yorkshireman was prey to the corruption of power

that distorts self-perception and feasts on the generosity of spirit among those it infects. Add the physical hardships and poor diet, and the most debilitating casualty became the consistency and clear-headedness that had earlier marked his relations with those around him.

His use of the lash had been sparing on the *Endeavour*, more frequent on the voyage of the *Resolution*, where almost a fifth of his earlier crew had chosen to sail with him. But it was still no more than the average at a time when many crew members had been unwillingly pressed into service from the taverns and flophouses of Plymouth and Portsmouth. But on this third voyage – also in the refitted *Resolution* with *Discovery* under Captain Charles Clerke as sister ship – Cook became a martinet. And when they reached the Pacific his behaviour became alarmingly erratic.

He was subject to violent outbursts of rage. In Tonga, for example, he broke his own strict rules of earlier visits by meting out floggings of up to six dozen lashes to islanders who stole from his ships. And as a midshipman noted, his punishments became increasingly bizarre, ‘cutting off their ears, firing at them with small shot or ball as they were swimming or paddling to the shore; and suffering the [crewmen] to beat them with the oars; and stick the boathook into them wherever they could hit them’.<sup>6</sup> Another wrote, ‘I cannot help thinking the man totally destitute of humanity.’<sup>7</sup>

However, when they reached Tahiti’s Matavai Bay, the ecstatic welcome from the islanders calmed his ragged spirits as they boarded the ships, ‘weeping and slashing themselves, searching for old friends and lovers and embracing them fervently when they found them’.<sup>8</sup> Cook declared a day of festivity. According to

the surgeon, David Samwell, when night fell a group of women dressed in short ruffled skirts performed a dance designed to drive the crewmen – Master Bligh among them – wild with desire. The dance, he wrote, ‘bespoke an excess of joy and licentiousness . . . most were young women who put themselves into several lascivious postures, clapp’d their hands and repeated a kind of Stanzas. At certain parts they put their garments aside and exposed with seemingly very little sense of shame those parts which most nations have thought it modest to conceal, & a woman of more advanced years stood in front, held her cloaths continually up with one hand and danced with uncommon vigour and effrontery as if to raise in the spectators the most libidinous desires.’

The crewmen, he says, responded with ‘a sort of rapture that could only be expressed by the extreme joy that appeared on their countenances.’<sup>9</sup> Well, not quite the only response. In truth, the six-week sojourn was a glorious sensual orgy, a care-less delight at the time, but it would have only the most sad and terrible consequences. The crewmen had brought venereal diseases with them and, perhaps unknowingly, had spread them among their various partners. The exuberant sexual expression intrinsic to Tahitian society meant they would eventually take a terrible toll.

The visit would confirm Cook’s dangerously inflated perception of himself as a demigod among the Pacific Islanders, and this would lead to his violent death at their hands before his tiny convoy returned to Britain. And it was *ne plus ultra* of Bligh’s experience with the Great Navigator. It is highly doubtful whether young William indulged himself sexually. Certainly he made no ‘island marriage’ as did so many of his fellows. As will

be seen, there are indications that he was somewhat ambiguous in his sexuality. But equally, he may well have patterned his behaviour on that of the father figure who had taken the ambitious 22-year-old in hand and tutored him in all the finer arts of navigation and hydrography. (Indeed, he would later represent himself to the Tahitians as James Cook's son.)

Cook seems to have resisted the gentle consolations so freely offered by the Tahitian chieftains and indeed the women themselves. Or if he did indulge, it was within the discreet confines of his Great Cabin on the *Resolution*. Either way, Bligh would have been impressed by the fact that, in spite of his increasingly erratic behaviour, Cook's command at sea would never be questioned, much less challenged, by those who served under him.

Cook's violent demise in Hawaii in February 1779 came as a terrible blow to his young admirer. But worse was in store. Bligh, it seems, was decidedly unpopular with the deputy commander, Captain John Gore, and on publication of the edited journal of the voyage he would be denied any credit for the pioneering hydrographic surveys he had undertaken. That went to his assistant Henry Roberts, whom Gore found a much more congenial character. Worse, Roberts was promoted to lieutenant while Bligh remained in the lower ranks as master. He was deeply humiliated and aggrieved.

His only consolation was his marriage in 1781 to the attractive and modestly well-connected Betsy Betham on the Isle of Man, a match that would endure for 31 years – despite (or perhaps because of) Bligh's frequent absence and wildly turbulent fortune – ending with her utter exhaustion in 1812. The marriage had been a step up the social ladder for Bligh, born on 9 September 1754 in his grandfather's stone farmhouse in Cornwall. His father

Francis worked as a customs officer in Plymouth and helped on the farm. And though there was naval tradition in the family background, by the time William was born there was no relative in the service who could act as his patron.<sup>10</sup>

At only seven, Bligh was enlisted as a captain's servant on the 64-gun warship HMS *Monmouth* – which rarely left its Plymouth moorings – and attended school on shore. At 15 he confirmed his intention to pursue a career in the navy by enlisting as an able-bodied seaman while waiting for a midshipman's berth. It arrived six months later when he was posted to HMS *Crescent*, a 32-gun frigate under the command of Captain James Corner. For three years the *Crescent* patrolled the Leeward Islands of the West Indies and Bligh surveyed and charted parts of the archipelago. Corner was a harsh disciplinarian, and in 1774 on the ship's return to England he had 17 of his crew flogged for attempted desertion. The lessons would not have been lost on the short, balding midshipman.

Bligh transferred to the eight-gun sloop HMS *Ranger* on smuggling patrol in the Irish Sea terminating at the Isle of Man, where Betsy's family boasted an uncle, Duncan Campbell, a wealthy merchant who owned convict hulks on the Thames and a fleet of merchant vessels trading with the slave colonies of the West Indies.

Bligh's progress up the Admiralty ladder was painfully slow, and although he passed his master's examination and completed the six years at sea required for a naval commission, he remained a lowly midshipman. When Cook appointed him the *Resolution's* master, he remained a senior warrant officer, though the opportunity to work in harness with the Great Navigator was highly prized. When on his return his achievements were overlooked,

Bligh was not just angry and resentful, but he nursed a sense of umbrage and rancour that would bite deep into his personality.

He finally secured an acting commission in September 1781 as a 5th lieutenant on the 74-gun HMS *Berwick* as Britain engaged in yet another battle for maritime dominance, this time against the Dutch. Other minor postings followed in various engagements against French and Spanish squadrons until in 1783, the Americans having finally secured their independence with the signing of the Peace of Paris, the British felt able to reduce their naval expenditure. Bligh was discharged on half pay, a lordly two shillings a day. Penury beckoned. Only Betsy's family stood between the anxious, irascible junior lieutenant and total despair. And of them, only her uncle Duncan provided an avenue of escape. When he offered Bligh a post as captain of the *Lynx*, one of his West Indian traders, at £500 a year the 29-year-old leapt at the chance to be a 'rum and sugar captain' in the merchant marine. Over the next four years he plied the Atlantic as commander of various ships within Campbell's fleet.

During his preparation of the *Britannia* for sea, he received a fateful letter from a well-known Isle of Man family seeking his indulgence. They had 10 children, and two of the sons were sent to Cambridge, but following the death of the head of the house – an attorney – they had fallen on hard times. Despite his excellent record at school, the next eldest son was unable to follow his brothers to university. So the 18-year-old enlisted in the navy as a midshipman and soon rose to the rank of acting lieutenant. Now he too was a victim of the peace and his mother appealed to Bligh to find a place for him.

His name was Fletcher Christian.

At first Bligh resisted. He'd already signed on a full complement of officers. Then came a personal plea from Christian himself. Wages were no object; his sole concern was to pursue his career. 'We Midshipmen are gentlemen,' he wrote. 'We never pull at a rope. I should even be glad to go on one voyage in that situation, for there may be occasions when officers may be called upon to do the duties of a common man.'<sup>11</sup>

Bligh relented and Christian signed on as a gunner. Almost as soon as they met, Bligh was attracted to the tall, handsome, athletic (if bow-legged) 23-year-old. And Christian himself seems to have been proudly adept at gaining the approval and affections of his shipmates.

'It was very easy to make oneself beloved on board a ship,' he wrote to his brother Edward. 'One only has to be ready to obey one's superior officers, and to be kind to the common men.'

It certainly worked with Bligh, whom he described as a 'passionate' man and who urged his officers on the *Britannia* to treat him as one of their own. The chief mate on the ship, Edward Lamb, would later tell Bligh, 'I saw your partiality to the young man. I gave him every advice and information in my power, though he went about every point of duty with a degree of indifference that to me was truly unpleasant; but you were blind to his faults and had him to dine and sup every other day in the cabin; and treated him like a brother in giving him every information.'<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, Uncle Duncan's convict hulks – and others like them – were filled to overflowing. In the Thames and in the southern harbours from Plymouth to Portsmouth, the convicts were penned like animals within the decommissioned naval vessels as disease and starvation took their inevitable toll. The

shore-based gaols threatened to burst at the seams. Something had to be done.

Transportation was by no means a novel solution. It had been part of government policy since 1620, and both Scottish and Irish prisoners of war had actually been sold as slaves in North America. But the total numbers involved were about 50,000 over almost two centuries. The new policy with Botany Bay as its destination was of a different order of magnitude. Now a whole criminal underclass was to be banished to a destination about which almost nothing was known but for the most fleeting landfalls on the east coast.

When the 47-year-old part-time farmer Captain Arthur Phillip set sail on 13 May 1787 with 772 convicts and their gaolers aboard 11 ships of the First Fleet, he carried with him instructions to establish a second settlement on a much smaller destination – Cook’s chance discovery in the ‘South Pacifick’: Norfolk Island.