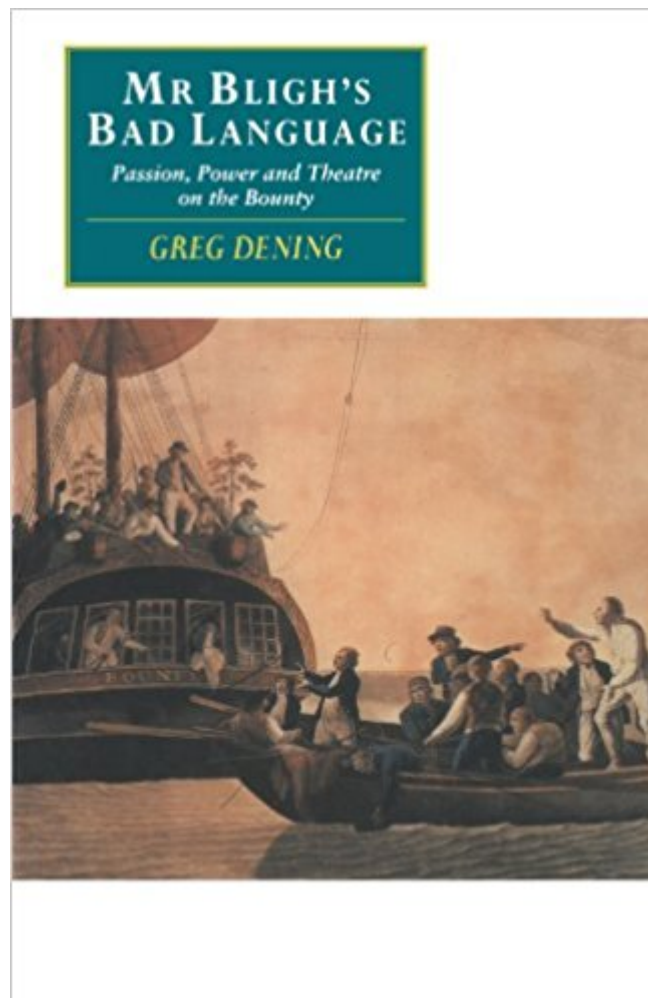




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Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power And Theatre On The Bounty (Canto Original Series)



Synopsis

Captain Bligh and the mutiny on the Bounty have become proverbial in their capacity to evoke the extravagant and violent abuse of power. But William Bligh was one of the least violent disciplinarians in the British navy. It is this paradox that inspired Greg Denning to ask why the mutiny took place. His book explores the theatrical nature of what was enacted in the power-play on deck, on the beaches of Tahiti and in the murderous settlement at Pitcairn, on the altar stones and temples of sacrifice, and on the catheads from which men were hanged. Part of the key lies in the curious puzzle of Mr Bligh's bad language.

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Customer Reviews

Mutiny on the Bounty summons to the popular mind images of violence and power on the high seas. Denning restores a sense of perspective in this fascinating study of the Bounty through images of space, language, and ceremony in Britain's Royal Navy of the late 18th century. Portraying Bligh as one of the least physically violent captains in the Royal Navy, he demonstrates the peculiarities on the Bounty that led to mutiny: ambiguous language, public vs. private space, the lack of ceremony, and the role of authority and power. Denning provides excellent details of the daily life of seamen and officers from the perspectives of history and anthropology. Readers will want to compare Leonard F. Guttridge's *Mutiny: A History of Naval Insurrection* (LJ 9/1/92) for a legal/political perspective. Recommended for academic and large public libraries.- Harold N. Boyer, Marple P.L., Broomall,

A learned, humane, provocative ``creative reading'' of the mutiny on the Bounty--the events; their meaning and representation in native lore, British life, the theater, and cinema; and their historical value. An engaging style and familiarity with political, naval, theater and film history, with anthropology, and with thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes, and L‚vi-Strauss enrich this ``celebratory narrative,'' as Denning (History/Univ. of Melbourne) calls it. The story is familiar but, Denning says, the emphasis, meaning, explanation, and value change depending on the point of view, the period, culture, and medium in which one represents the character of Bligh (a perfectionist who preferred to avoid physical punishment) and the sailors; the idea of discipline in the navy; the participants' various expectations; the natives they encountered; the brutality and brutalization, abandonment and retribution; and the survivors' colony on Pitcairn Island. In the theatrical terms Denning employs, the mutiny becomes an enactment of roles, a ritual representing universal experiences of sacrifice, deification, resurrection, possession, encounters between natives and strangers, and the ranging iconography of power as it appears among natives and seamen. Denning's ``cliometrics'' (the statistics on corporeal punishment in the navy); his discussions of Jonas Hanway, of Captain Cook's adventures among the Polynesians, of the British popular theater, of the five films based on the Bounty (including the moral one in the 30's, the political one in the 60's, and the psychological one in the 80's); the encyclopedic knowledge he brings--all add conviction to his imaginative interpretations and demonstrate his proposition that ``history is something we make rather than something we learn.'' A fascinating, essential chapter in the history of the Bounty. (Fifty halftones, three maps--not seen.) -- Copyright    1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

My problem with Mr. Bligh's bad language is that it's hard to find any examples of Mr. Bligh using bad language in this book. Bligh's writing about the South Seas is stoic, unemotional, and mostly nautical. Although he was famous for his bad temper and his insults. We don't get to hear his bad language. There is also little, if anything, about Bligh's first voyage as a ship master with Lt. Cook. Cook inflicted more floggings than Bligh, yet Bligh has the bad reputation. Why? He verbally humiliated underlings. Cook punished men, but left with self-respect. This book is only for the die hard Cook researchers or followers.

written by an Australian professor, very well researched and documented, shows that Bligh was not the worst or the best captain at that time. He later went on to become a very good and respected Governor of NSW in the colonies

Social theorists have tried many definitions of human nature: human beings are the animals that make tools, that laugh, that play. I have another: Human-beings are history-makers. We eternally make our present by looking backwards. We present ourselves by expressing a significant past. To know us in our history is to know who we are. -Greg Dening (Performances) At 4:30 A.M. on April 28, 1789 a series of events began which has ever since held a grip on Western imagination. Fletcher Christian led a mutiny against Captain William Bligh aboard HMS Bounty. The aftermath of this rebellion included: Bligh's remarkable 4,000 mile journey with 18 loyal crewmen in an open launch; the sinking of HMS Pandora, which had been sent out to arrest the mutineers, with a loss of 34 men, including 4 of the Bounty crew; and the establishment of a weird sort of tropical commune on Pitcairn's Island by Christian and eight other men along with the Tahitian women (and a few friends and progeny) who may or may not have been the precipitating cause of the whole fiasco. Eventually Bligh would return to sea, three of the mutineers would be returned to England and hanged and all but one of the men on Pitcairn's Island would be murdered or die of disease. Now there's obviously enough material there to justify the boatload of Bounty books, plays and movies that have poured forth in a steady stream over the past two centuries, but what Professor Dening has uniquely done is to consider the uses to which the story has been put over those years. He makes the convincing argument that Captain Bligh, contrary to popular imagery, was not particularly abusive of his men. Indeed, the title of the book is reflective of Dening's position that Bligh was mostly despised for the harsh language he used in upbraiding men, not for any physical measures nor for the quality of his command in general. Having made his case, Dening moves on to a consideration of why our historical understanding of Bligh requires that he be seen as an ogre. If the "reality" is that he was a fairly mild captain for his time, why do we, looking backward, see him as the very embodiment of tyrannical authority? Why are Christian and his cohorts seen as heroes, virtual freedom fighters? The book is wide ranging, learned, entertaining and thought provoking, but its best feature is the balance that Dening strikes between the effort to present the story of the Bounty as ethnographic history ("an attempt to represent the past as it was actually experienced") and the realization that: a historical fact is not what happened but that small part of what has happened that has been used by historians to talk about, History is not the past: it is a consciousness of the past used for present purposes. Everyone who has ever been subjected to a

history course in the modern university is familiar with the obsession with primary sources, the Left dictatorship which controls academia insists that the "truth" is to be found in the pamphlets and diaries and letters of the unimportant and the obscure, rather than in the texts and speeches of the great who shaped our understanding of events. Denning, on the other hand, understands that there is a fundamental dichotomy between the way participants experienced historical events and their importance to the society as a whole. In a very real sense, it is simply not important whether Christ was the son of God, whether England ruled the colonies harshly, whether Southerners fought for slavery, whether FDR ended the Depression, whether Nixon subverted the Constitution and Clinton merely lied about sex--what matters is that this is how we perceive these events. In Denning's felicitous phrase: Illusions make things true; truth does not dispel illusion.GRADE: A-

"It's not useful" would be a more accurate expression of why I gave this book 2 stars. I agree with "Whammo" that there isn't much about William Bligh's bad language in the book, and it is also one of those long University Press books filled with erudite language, disorganized ideas, and abstractions. I really don't quite know what the point of the book is.

Greg Denning's work looks over the previous shallow interpretations, in both scholarly works and in popular culture, of Bligh's character and his actions aboard H.M.S Bounty. In popular culture, Charles Laughton's portrayal of Bligh in the 1935 film whilst entertaining was played more for dramatic effect than historical accuracy but it was, after all, a film and its objective was entertainment, not enlightenment. In Denning's words, "'Captain Bligh' is almost a cliché of our times for misused power.". Perhaps less understandable is the character assassination that was committed by more scholarly authors such as Hughes in "The Fatal Shore" and Clarks monumental "History of Australia". Though in both cases, these treatises do not deal directly with the incidents aboard the Bounty but in his Gubernatorial duties in New South Wales and his alleged cowardice in dealing with the "Rum Rebellion" and the events preceding. This is an excellent work for the dedicated reader but it can be hard going for the more casual reader. Even those amongst us with superior vocabularies will require consultations with a dictionary from time to time. This is my sole criticism, however. Recommended! Mark Harrison Sydney, Australia markharr@ar.com.au

"I am a professor of parables," writes author Greg Denning, "and the Bounty is a parable. Indeed, there is much parable about ourselves in our peculiarly twentieth-century representations of the past of the Bounty." Five of those representations have taken the form of film. Denning has added a sixth,

in the form of a three-act academesque. Thoughtful prologue(s), entr'actes, and an epilogue link the narrative to its historical context, its local mise-en-scene, and its modern role as an icon of cultural literacy. The drama takes place aboard ship (a wooden world where the language of every action reverberates upon the soul of the voyage), on the beach (the place where the conquering sea meets the vanquished land, a transitive action complete with subject and object), and on the island (where sailors fall from grace with the sea, "bad language" in anybody's book). The entr'actes bring us face to face with rituals of sacrifice, peace offerings, and politics, a brash yet brilliant contrast of original Polynesian culture with that of colonizing England. In Denning's final analysis, it's all a matter of management - management of work and play, management of the "oeconomy," management of the sublime - all work together to form one unabridged narrative of drama at sea in the eighteenth century. Superb.

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