

Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the "Bounty."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xii, 445, illus., bibliography, index. US\$34.95 cloth.

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Greg Dening's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the "Bounty"* is a welcomed addition to the literature of this "historic" "ill-fated voyage." In his creation he produces a melange of contemporary theory, rhetoric, and the documents of history. His setting is the stage. The result is the historical reenactment of the *Bounty* drama.

On the one hand, the work appears straightforward, a history told. Yet Dening prefers the notion of a narrative, not one voice but many that create a shared invention. He places the work in the theatre, creating the stage on which the drama unfolds. Additionally, Dening walks us through the piece. He talks to his readers, allowing them to be part of his play. As his prologue sets the stage, he tells us of his role (p. 3):

By tradition, too, the deliverer of the prologue enters by a "stage door" that is not part of the scenery but marks a special entry place of someone who for the moment is neither actor nor audience, but in between, distant by being didact, dangerous by being ironist, disturbing by being a relativist. . . . The imagination he or she sparked was dialogic and by that the audience was enticed into the conspiracy of its own engagement of making realism.

In so doing he engages and challenges his audience. We must read critically and at the same time watch the drama play itself out. This is an intriguing way to offer up a complicated, yet well-known history.

We know that this tale is, above all, a history, for the characters have been a part of our lives. Hollywood has seen to this with its versions of the story. Nordoff and Hall have written the "*Bounty* Trilogy." There was at least one "ill-fated" theatrical piece that I had the (mis)fortune to see in London in 1985. But Dening's tale is more than these fictions turned histories. His creation is based both on the *Bounty's* historical documents and his critical interpretation of them.

We begin with dates. December 23, 1787, the *Bounty* sailed from Portsmouth. April 28, 1789, the mutiny took place. March 14, 1790, Bligh returned to England. These dates, their histories, and the myriad of historical implications are just the beginning. Actually, there are three beginnings to this book. Dening uses the notion of a prologue, which enables a multiplicity

of viewpoints. Bligh becomes an object whose everyday living creates the *Bounty* theatre. Denning states: "By long tradition theatre needs a prologue. The prologue is more than just a beginning. The prologue fills that marginal space between the conventionalities of everyday living and the conventionalities of being in the theatre. The prologue mediates one and the other, [and] educates the audience to its role" (p. 3). The "conventionalities" Denning speaks of address both the importance and banality of everyday experiences. How was Bligh to know that his "bad language" would result in infamy? In this work, Denning magnifies the everyday, studying the multiple meanings and interpretations of a variety of actions and relationships. Essential to this work is Denning's ability to make his play come to life--to interpret the drama of the *Bounty*. The stage where most of the action takes place is in what Denning terms marginal spaces. These spaces are not only beaches, but the ship, the launch, the courtroom, Pitcairn Island, the *Pan-dora*, Hollywood. Here, history and myth become one. Bligh is one actor, as is Christian, as is the beach of Matavai. By creating the set, by giving voices to all involved, these spaces come alive. Denning's drama teaches not only British maritime history and its complex ramifications, but the extraordinary theatre it created.

Denning's method, however, does have its shortcomings. As the play is built scene upon scene, they often are quite tangential. The audience hopes that it will all make sense in the end (as it does), but, in the meantime, wonders where the story is going. An example of this is found in the title-- *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*. One expects that language will play a key role: that we will discover why Mr. Christian was in "hell," that we will be given evidence (explicit, hopefully) of Bligh's language skills and his abilities to demoralize his men with a cursed tongue. Instead we learn the etymology of such seafaring jargon as "shake a leg," "taken aback," and to be at "loggerheads" (pp. 55-56). The scene continues, however, and we are told that Bligh "cursed the Admiralty" and frequently used such potent words as "scoundrels" and "damned rascals" to berate his officers. The audience muses, for we have no context to understand the meaning of these words. Denning goes on to explain: "Bligh's bad language was the ambiguous language of his command. It was bad, not so much because it was intemperate or abusive, but because it was ambiguous, because men could not read in it a right relationship to his authority" (p. 61). It appears now that language has taken a backseat to the authority that Bligh wanted, and perhaps never earned. In the process, however, much information about the interrelationships among the men of the *Bounty* is revealed. The tangent has become an integral part of the play.

The drama, theatricality, and performances of the *Bounty* become the

leitmotifs of the work. These, of course, are played out against the theatre of the Pacific. Dening tries to give the reader the cultural knowledge to understand the ritual of interaction, the importance (or deification) of authority, and sacrifice. In so doing, another tangential monologue is performed. It concerns Hawaii and Sahlins's interpretations of Cook's death (1985, 1989). Dening comments that the Tahitians, like the Hawaiians, "were adept at seeing the divine in the human, whatever the contradictions" (p. 196). This direction is problematic. It only adds to the tendency to fuse the Hawaiians and Tahitians together without concern for the historical, social, political, or ideological specifics of different situations. Fortunately, only a prophecy is cited, as no scholar has written to confirm the "belief" in the coming of a canoe without an outrigger (pp. 192-197). I would assert that the Tahitians did not believe in the divinity of all British seamen. As Wallis deferred to Porea, Porea did to Wallis. The creation of an economic relationship and courtesy extended to visitors does not create or even suggest divinity. Again Dening's narrative reads as fact, not one man's invention.

Dening's proclivity to relate everything to the stage is countered by the proliferation of meticulously researched facts. This is both an engaging and baffling approach. The reader as audience must interpret the information without knowing if this is a well-written story or an academic novel. Dening adds to this problem when stating: "Reader, the years are too long already for me to spend more time being certain. Let me transfer the burden to your shoulders. Read my narrative. It will be then for you to decide how different my story would be if none of it was true" (p. 251). I find this disconcerting for two reasons. One, it seems to negate the importance of the research done. Not only has Dening gone through all the historical documents, he has reconstructed them in such a way that the *Bounty* becomes more than just myth. Two, Dening's history becomes narrative, which enables his interpretations to become fact. He rarely makes note of sources in the text, which allows the drama to play itself out. It also allows Dening to use artistic license. He talks of inventions (p. 277), a "sureness in my narrative," and "vicarious authenticity to my judgements and interpretations" (p. 390).

Dening, however, takes responsibility for his drama. He acknowledges its creation. His actors play out their roles. In his epilogue Dening talks of "claptrap" (pp. 371-374)--the ability of a performer to elicit spontaneous applause, the audience losing themselves in the play. This is what Dening does. Historical accuracy and theatrical invention blend in *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* to create a performance "in which the audience--or the reader or the viewer--participates in the creative process of representing" (p. 372). The result is an entertaining, postmodern, historical novel where the reality of the *Bounty* becomes myth and the myth becomes history.

REFERENCES CITED

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