From safe haven to island abandonment - impacts of the growth of Pacific shipping on the Pitcairn Island community during the 19th century

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Abstract

The story of the Bounty mutiny is one of the great sagas of Pacific history and has inspired a rich literature for more than two centuries. By contrast, our knowledge of the community founded by Fletcher Christian at Pitcairn Island has remained enigmatic and obscured by evangelical and Euro-centric interpretations of the survival and development of the settlement. Founded by a small, culturally-divided group of settlers on one of the most remote islands in the Pacific and completely cut off from the world for the first 18 years of its existence - the establishment of the settlement may be seen as a remarkable success. Fifty years after the arrival of the Bounty settler-group, the island had become a regular port-of-call in the expanding network of Pacific shipping and the Pitcairn community, now approaching 200 people, had established important relationships with the Royal Navy, the American whaling fleet and Pacific communities in Tahiti, Valparaiso and Sydney. Just a few years later however, the resources of the island could no longer cope with the increasing demands and the entire population of Pitcairn was removed to Norfolk Island. Based on historical research and archaeological fieldwork conducted on Pitcairn, this paper examines the process of colonisation at Pitcairn to reveal the changing nature of an island environment in a period of rapid change in the Pacific.

Key words: Mutiny, Pacific, Whaling, Royal Navy

Mutiny and Pitcairn

> "Know then my own dear Betsy, I have lost the Bounty. …On the 28th April at daylight in the morning Christian having the morning

watch, he with several others came into my cabin while I was asleep, and seizing me, holding naked bayonets at my breast, tied my hands behind my back, and threatened instant destruction if I uttered a word."

With these words to his wife, William Bligh (Brunton, 1989) described the event which would galvanize public opinion and haunt him for the rest of his life. Recounted repeatedly, dissected, weighed and scrutinized from every angle, the story of the mutiny on the *Bounty* has been the subject of numerous books and films and needs no further discussion here. By contrast, the subject of my paper – the settlement of Pitcairn Island by mutineers from the *Bounty* and their Polynesian partners - is a story which is far less known, and in the context of this conference's theme, represents one of the earliest sources of data demonstrating the impact of European activities in the Pacific.

Fig.1: Pitcairn Island. (Photographer Jon Carpenter, © Nigel Erskine)

Pitcairn is a volcanic island situated in the Eastern Pacific, south and east of the southern end of the Tuamotu Islands. The first European record of the island was made by Philip Carteret in 1767 when his ship HMS *Swallow* sailed around it. His description of the island was published in John Hawkesworth's *Voyages* in 1773. Carteret wrote:

"…it appeared like a great rock rising out of the sea: it was not more than five miles in circumference, and seemed to be uninhabited; it was, however, covered in trees, and we saw a small stream of water running down one side of it. I would have landed upon it, but the surf, which at this season broke upon it with great violence, rendered it impossible"

Cook passed to the east of Pitcairn in 1769, and to the west in 1773, without sighting the island – suggesting the position of the island, calculated by Carteret and shown on Hawkesworth's chart of the Pacific, was wrong. Indeed, while Carteret's latitude for Pitcairn was relatively accurate, his longitude placed Pitcairn 320 kilometres too far west – a not unusual error in the period prior to the use of chronometers and one which the mutineer Fletcher Christian appears to have suspected. For, following an abortive attempt by the *Bounty* mutineers to settle on the island of Tubuai (300 km south of Tahiti), and after leaving 16 mutineers at Tahiti, Christian took the *Bounty* east against the prevailing wind, sailing along the latitude given by Carteret until finally sighting Pitcairn in January 1790. When the vessel finally anchored, it had 28 people aboard – 9 European mutineers, 6 Polynesian men, 12 Polynesian women and a baby girl.

Once ashore the group soon found evidence of previous Polynesian occupation of the island in the form of rock carvings and a morai, and later they would discover a stone quarry on the southern side of the island littered with the discarded flakes from tool manufacturing.[1] While this evidence of a Polynesian presence remained, the Bounty settlers soon realised they were alone on the island and totally reliant on a combination of their skills, the resources they brought with them, and what they found in their new home, to establish a viable community. Indeed Pitcairn offered Fletcher Christian and his fellow mutineers the perfect place to hide! Uninhabited, incorrectly charted and cliff-bound, the island was

effectively lost to Europeans in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean - a harbourless, uncontested 2.5 square mile speck of land where the next stage of the *Bounty* saga would be played out. Satisfied with their new home, the mutineers set about stripping the ship, and after a week, they set fire to it – destroying it completely.

With the destruction of their vessel, the *Bounty* settlers became self-imposed exiles – a tiny community in the Pacific hiding from the Royal Navy and completely cut off from the world. Indeed, the mutineers had found a place so remote that the settlement remained undisturbed for the first 18 years of its existence and it was only as a network of Pacific trade gradually developed in the 19th century that Pitcairn's isolation diminished.

Violence and isolation

The first years of settlement on the island were marked by violence as the mutineers divided the island's resources amongst themselves and attempted to impose their control over the Polynesians who had accompanied them to Pitcairn. In the case of the women, each of the 9 mutineers had a partner from amongst the 12 women, leaving 3 women to partner with the 6 Polynesian men. This situation was initially tolerated by the Polynesian men who were now treated as servants to the mutineers, but following the deaths of two of the women (one falling off a cliff while collecting birds' eggs, and the other dying of natural causes), the affected mutineers took new partners from those living with the Polynesian men. This produced immediate hostilities between the Polynesian men and the mutineers and resulted in the murder of two of the Polynesian men in 1791. Two years later a second wave of violence spread across the island, claiming the lives of Fletcher Christian and four other mutineers, quickly followed by the murder of the last remaining Polynesian men.

With these deaths the community settled into a period of relative peace for another six years until 1799 when William McCoy committed suicide. In that same year Matthew Quintal was killed by his shipmates in a pre-emptive strike after he threatened them. And finally in December 1800, John Adams emerged as the last mutineer standing when Edward Young died of natural causes. After a decade on the island, and with the population standing at 38 (consisting of 27 children, 10 women and 1 man), the community now entered a new era of peace and stability.

In regard to viability of the settlement, the violence characterizing this early period highlights the fact that the main threat to the community was social rather than ecological. Like Pandora's Box, the *Bounty* contained a volatile mix of racial, sexual and class tensions thrown together by the chance circumstances of the mutiny and which Polynesians happened to be sleeping aboard when the vessel left Tahiti for the last time. With the destruction of the *Bounty*, these forces were released and, as we have seen, played out to bloody resolution. However, despite this violence, a number of positive factors contributed to the initial survival of the community.

Pitcairn was a relatively fertile island with natural resources of water, trees, plants, fish and birds – a Pacific environment with which the Polynesian women were familiar, where their skills in such things as sourcing food, thatching and producing tapa cloth, were immediately beneficial. Adding to the natural resources, were resources brought ashore from the *Bounty*. These included pigs, goats, chickens, plants, seeds and gardening tools, muskets, gunpowder, axes and saws, a forge and bellows, wheelbarrows, medical supplies, books and cooking pots - as well as rope, canvas , iron and timber from the ship.

Also brought ashore were elements of maritime culture relating to the maintenance and allocation of provisions. An observer present in 1814 (the second contact with shipping) noted (Pipon, 1834) that John Adams maintained a journal system of 'regular established allowance', a practice paralleling the role of the purser on board naval vessels. On Pitcairn food was either stored communally to create a 'food bank' accessible throughout the seasons, or (in the case of perishables) divided equally using a system known as the 'share out'. Aboard the *Bounty* this form of division was known as *Who shall have this*? Bligh (1790) described this method, which he used to divide a seabird amongst the men during his famous open boat voyage:

> "One person turns his back on the object that is to be divided; another then points separately to the portions, at each of them asking aloud, "Who shall have this?" to which the first answers by naming somebody. This impartial method of division gives every man an equal chance of the best share."

The settlers also lived communally in a single village. Very early on, the pigs and goats had gone feral and fences had been built around parts of the village to protect the vegetable gardens. Communal living also helped to harness the labour and skills of the settlers, efficiently sustaining the settlement through the years of total isolation.
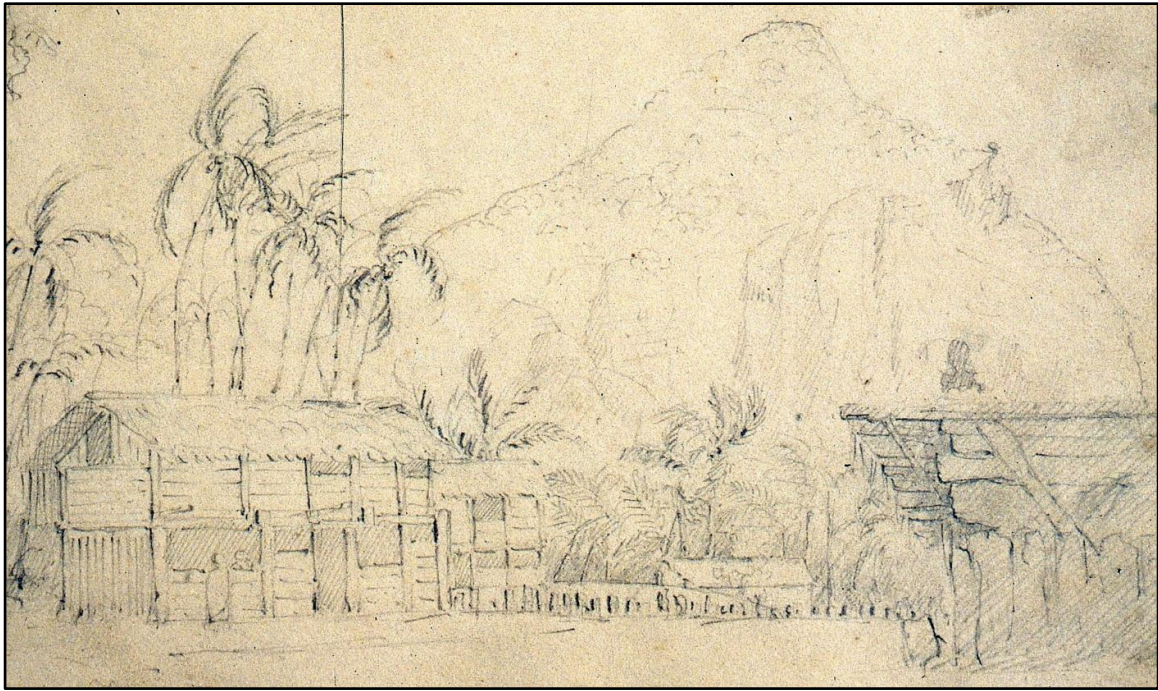
Fig.2: Village at Pitcairn 1825, artist William Smyth. (State Library of NSW PXB55)

First contact

In 1808, that isolation was finally interrupted by the arrival of the sealer *Topaz.* It was an edifying occasion all round, with captain Folger as surprised to be hailed in English by the young 'natives' who paddled out to his ship, as indeed they were to see such a large and foreign object floating off their island. Mindful of his mutineer status, John Adams sensibly remained on Pitcairn, but despite this, goodwill was established by an exchange of objects. In itself, the impact of this visit was slight but it set an important precedent, as Adams later recalled (Bechervaise, 1839):

> "They got from this ship a great number of articles they stood in need of, after which no vessel came near the island without being visited."

Six years later the islanders were again amazed, this time finding two Royal Navy ships laying off the island. It should have been the moment of truth for the old mutineer but his luck remained! For after touring the village and meeting Adams and his burgeoning flock, Sir Thomas Staines, the senior captain, declared that Adams was a reformed character whose arrest and removal from the island could only have a detrimental effect on the community. In an instant John Adams was transformed from villain to hero and thereafter the community at Pitcairn enjoyed both legitimacy and celebrity, becoming a popular port of call in a rapidly expanding network of Pacific sailing routes. Some measure of the relative isolation of the community at Pitcairn in the first half of the 19th century can be seen in the following charts.
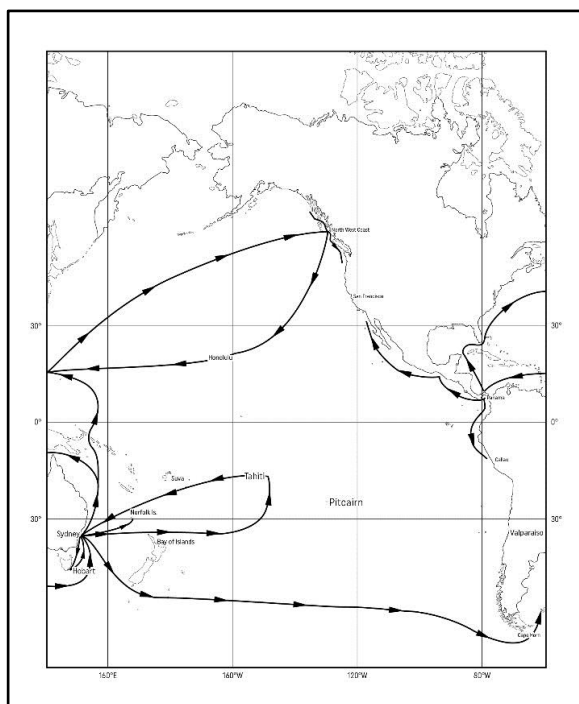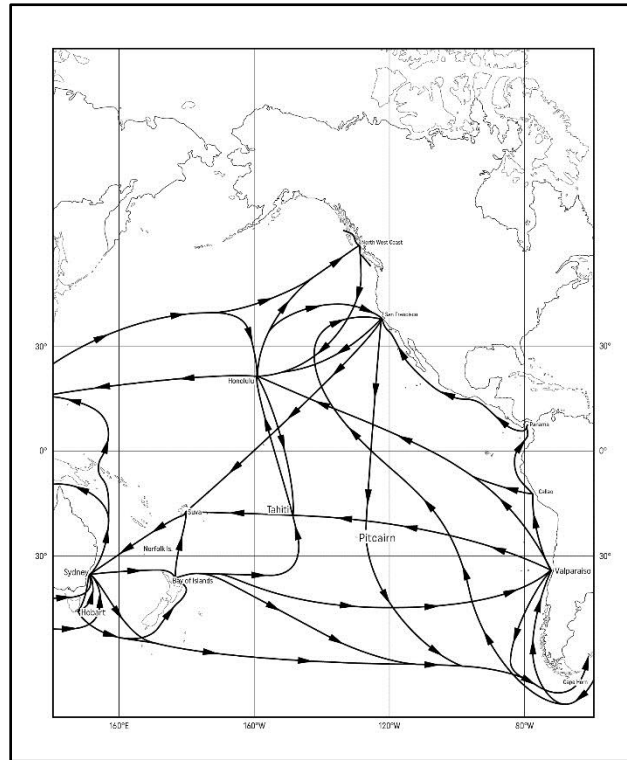
Fig.3: Principal Pacific Ocean sailing routes in 1800. (Erskine)
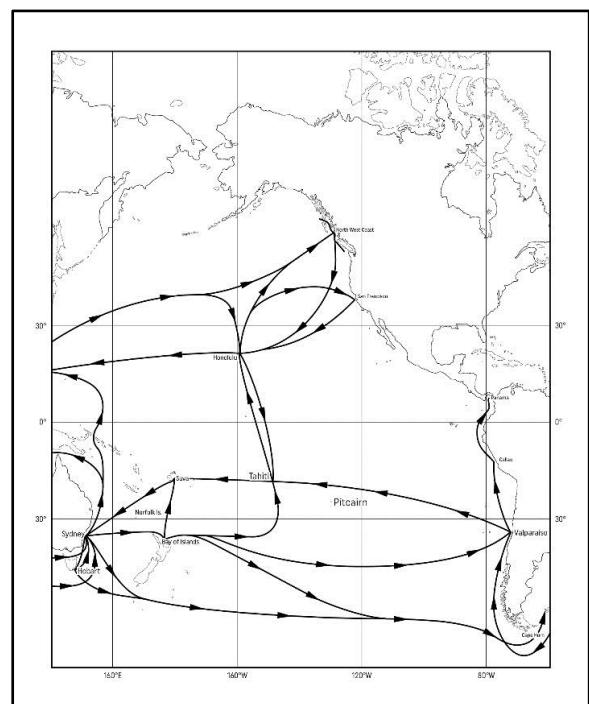
Fig.4 Principal Pacific Ocean sailing routes in 1825. (Erskine)

Fig.5: Principal Pacific Ocean sailing routes in 1850. (Nigel Erskine)

In 1788 a British settlement was established at Port Jackson on the east coast of Australia, which finding itself poorly supplied from Britain, soon initiated sailing routes to the more fertile Norfolk Island and to Tahiti for pork. Those ships which did arrive from Britain with supplies, returned there either by the southerly Cape Horn route or via one of the trading centres in Asia such as Calcutta, Canton and Batavia. At the same time a regular route was established between China and the Pacific North West by vessels trading in sea otter pelts, and routes along the west coasts of the Americas serviced Spanish supply lines.

Some measure of the relative importance of particular trade centres in the Pacific is indicated by the growth of European populations. In 1820 Honolulu had a foreign population of about 90. By 1842 the town's population had grown to 8000 people, of whom 500 were foreign. At the same time, Papeete had a foreign population of around 70, and the Bay of Islands in New Zealand over 600 Europeans. Both Levuka and Apia

developed later, and had foreign populations of around 50 by the 1850s (Ralston, 1979).

Of these centres, the most important for Pacific trade before the discovery of gold in California was Honolulu. The location of the Hawaiian Islands in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean made them a natural centre linking trade routes between the North-West coast of America, California and China. After 1849 San Francisco assumed much greater importance in Pacific commerce, resulting in the development of sailing routes between Australia and San Francisco, and San Francisco, New England and Europe. Both the route from Australia and New Zealand to San Francisco, and the route from San Francisco to Europe via Cape Horn, passed close to Pitcairn and represented a significant change in the relative isolation of the island.
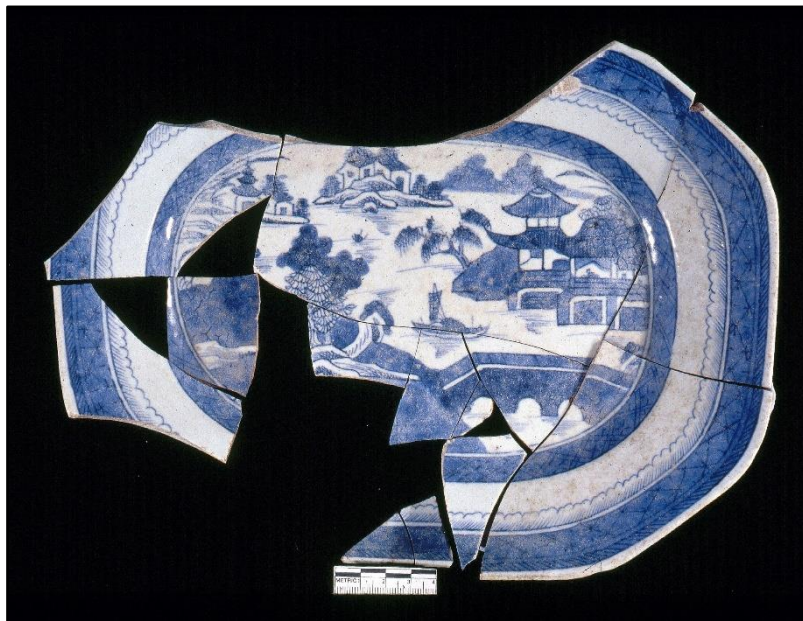
Fig.6: Chinese Export Ware plate c.1816 – example of trade item excavated at Pitcairn land site. (Nigel Erskine)

Development of Trade

A total of 432 ships visited Pitcairn between 1808 and 1856, with the majority being whale ships. Some idea of the pattern of trade between

the Pitcairn community and the crews of these ships is apparent in surviving logbooks.

One of the earliest accounts describing trading activities at Pitcairn is that of the American whaleship *Russell* that visited Pitcairn in 1822. Arriving off the island, the ship was met by a boat carrying seven of the islanders who "…brought us some bananas, plantains, coconuts and melons and informed us that there was a quantity more on the island". The ship took on fresh water over a period of three days – allowing part of the crew ashore each day on liberty. When it came time to depart, the islanders[2]:

> "…stood around us with tears in their eyes and presented us with some little tokens of friendship and said that we were not to pay for them but send more ships there as they would be very lonesome when we were gone. They supplied us with such vegetables and fruit as the island produced without asking anything for them but seemed pleased to have us in their home."

It is clear from this account that trade at this time was largely unregulated and limited to the basic resources of water, vegetables and fruit. By 1825 the impact of shipping appears to have induced experiments with new crops and Captain Beechey (1968) listed English potatoes, peas, beans and onions amongst these. In 1830 Captain Waldegrave (1833) listed the supplies available to ships:

> "Ships may obtain fire-wood at Pitcairn's Island in abundance, with a certain quantity of yams. Coconuts and plantains, but not a large supply; poultry and pigs they object to part with: it would be impossible to water a man-of-war, as the water is carried from *Brown's Well* on the shoulders of the natives."

A significant change is evident by 1834 when a regular price for articles is listed in the Pitcairn Island Register. This indicates that 'exotic' produce

such as Irish potatoes, beans and onions had been successfully established and that chickens were available in quantity by this date. In effect, Pitcairn had joined the provisioning trade and over the next 20 years the demands on the island's resources increased dramatically.

For example in 1836 the whaleship *Triton* took[3] two boatloads of wood, 54 chickens and a pig and in the following years there is consistent reference to the supply of potatoes, beans, pumpkins and wood in relatively large quantities. In 1843 the *Charles* took[4] six boatloads of potatoes and four boatloads of wood. In 1847 the *Three Brothers* took[5] 130 barrels of water, 34 barrels of yams, 34 barrels of sweet potatoes, five barrels of Irish potatoes, 22 chickens, five pigs, a duck and two boatloads of wood and so on. At the same time as these foreign demands were taxing the island's resources, the population of Pitcairn had been growing steadily, reaching 194 in 1856.

Environmental impact of trade

The evidence indicates that the growth in Pacific shipping had a negative impact on Pitcairn. For in addition to demands on the island's limited water supplies, the provisioning trade significantly depleted the island's timber resources and placed an increasing burden on the land as the Pitcairn islanders attempted to produce agricultural surpluses. Some indication of the environmental impact of such changes is suggested by an example of catastrophic erosion recorded in the Pitcairn Island Register for 1845 (Lucas, 1929):

> "…the place in question was situated at the head of a ravine which debouched into the sea; the rain mixing with the falling earth (which was of a clayey nature) brought it to the consistency of thick mud but sufficiently liquefied to glide very slowly down the inclined plane of the valley – nothing with which it came in contact could resist its

force – the large trees at the head of the ravine and immense pieces of rock, were borne slowly but unresistingly along and about three hundred coconut trees were torn up by the roots and swept into the sea."

Further evidence indicative of the community's vulnerability and inability to sustain increasingly high levels of trade exists in the last years of the settlement. During the visit of HMS *Portland* in May 1853, Rear Admiral Fairfax Moresby found the island badly affected by drought and donated grain to sustain the community. Six months later, Captain Morshead of HMS *Dido* found the island still affected by drought and left more supplies.

The crop failures of 1853 revealed the vulnerability of the community at Pitcairn and prompted application to the British Government to relocate the community to Norfolk Island. Supported by Rear Admiral Fairfax Moresby, the request was favourably received in England and Sir William Denison was instructed to make arrangements for the removal of the Pitcairn Islanders to Norfolk Island.

The impact of human settlement on island ecologies is a major theme in Polynesian colonisation of the Pacific. In this context Fosberg (1963) noted the great variation between islands of the eastern Pacific and large continental islands of the western Pacific and emphasised the effects of isolation and limited size in creating insular and fragile ecological environments which were highly vulnerable to disturbance associated with human settlement. While Pitcairn does not fit into the extreme category with fragile environments such as atolls, the total impact of colonisation on the island was no less devastating – it simply took longer and was ultimately the result of both internal and external factors.

Conclusion

Turner (1962) conceived of the frontier as a dynamic process of expansion, characterised by continuous movement into free land at the margins of the colonial area by a succession of industries comprising fur-traders, miners, ranchers and farmers who were irresistibly attracted to the resource opportunities of the new area. European expansion into the Pacific was motivated by similar opportunities that were exploited by industries such as the pork trade, pearling, sandalwood, beche-de-mer and whaling. However, unlike the opening of vast new land areas of the American West, the expansion into the maritime frontier of the Pacific took place in a context of hundreds of small islands of which Pitcairn was but one. The history of Pitcairn Island provides a record of the ecological cost of such expansion.

Endnotes

[1]In this context, Marshall Weisler's work (1993) has shown that this Polynesian presence dates to a period starting about AD 850 and ending in about 1500. Weisler, M. 1993 Long-distance Interaction in Prehistoric Polynesia: Three case studies, unpublished thesis, University of California, Berkeley
[2] Pacific Manuscript Bureau microfilm 890
[3]Pacific Manuscript Bureau microfilm 671
[4]Pacific Manuscript Bureau microfilm 318
[5]Pacific Manuscript Bureau microfilm 386

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Biography

Nigel Erskine is Head of Research at the Australian National Maritime Museum. As a maritime archaeologist he has worked extensively in the South Pacific and was Director of the Norfolk Island Museum 2000 – 2003. As a maritime archaeologist he has worked on the sites of HMS *Sirius*, HMS *Pandora*, HMS *Bounty*, HMS *Porpoise*, *Cato* and *Mermaid*. Since 2005 he has been actively involved with the Rhode Island Maritime Archaeology Project in the search for Cook's ship *Endeavour*.

His recent work includes developing interpretive narratives for ANMM's core galleries, building the museum's international engagement in archaeological projects, and expanding the museum's research profile.