PITCAIRN: PARADISE LOST

UNCOVERING THE DARK SECRETS OF A SOUTH PACIFIC FANTASY ISLAND

Kathy Marks

Harper Collins, Sydney, Australia, 2008.

The story of the establishment of Pitcairn Island must be known to most in Australia. In brief, Captain William Bligh set sail in the late 18th century bound for Tahiti. The mission for *HMS Bounty* and her crew of 45 was to collect breadfruit plants to be used as cheap food for the slaves in the West Indies.

On their way home, Fletcher Christian and some of the crew mutinied. They set Captain Bligh and the other crew members adrift in the ship's launch. Bligh and the crew miraculously survived and returned to England. The mutineers took the ship back to Tahiti, collected some Polynesian men and women, and hid on the uninhabited and isolated Pitcairn Island.

The story has become well-known through books and a number of films. The films have starred some of the best-known actors: Errol Flynn, Charles Laughton, Clark Gable, Anthony Hopkins, Marlon Brando, Trevor Howard, and even Mel Gibson.

In the intervening years, from the mutiny to the 1990s, Pitcairn Island developed a reputation as a mysterious, isolated island, a remote paradise:

> ... stabilised by religion, with negligible crimes, and largely capable of running its own affairs. Just before the dawn of the new millennium, that perception was turned on its head (Marks 2008:1).

Many fell under the island's spell. At the end of 1999, however, several Pitcairn girls reported that they had been sexually assaulted by a New Zealand visitor. A British policewoman was on the island and one of the victims stated that she had been raped by two islanders in the past:

> An investigation into those allegations developed into a major inquiry that saw British detectives criss-cross the globe, interviewing dozens of Pitcairn women. Their conclusion was that nearly every girl growing up on the island in the past 40 years had been abused, and nearly every man had been an offender (Marks 2008:1).

In brief, child sexual abuse occurred on an extraordinary scale:

> ... 32 women who had grown up on Pitcairn said they had been sexually abused. Thirty-one men, some now dead, were accused. Seven women alone named Steven Christian, the island's mayor, as their attacker (McKie 2006: 30).

Kathy Marks was one of six journalists to get access to the island, and lived on Pitcairn during the trials and then followed the story, filing reports for *The Independent* that were published around the world, including in *The New Zealand Herald.*

According to Marks, with about 50 inhabitants, Pitcairn operated like one big all-encompassing family. One person said: 'you don't go against the family'. Many women did just that, however. They reported the abuse they had suffered (Marks 2008: 264). Few children had told their parents about the assaults when they occurred. Gillian was an exception; when very small, she told her parents that she was assaulted by her uncle:

> Her father spoke to his brother about it, and the brother was 'apologetic'. Unfortunately for Gillian, he did not leave his niece alone (Marks 2008:264).

Marks, as others have done, draws out the parallels with William Golding's classic novel, *Lord of the Flies*:

> Golding's message is clear: we are brutish and cruel, and it is only society's constraints that prevent us from behaving like animals. When those constraints are removed, along with the rule of law, we quickly descend from civilisation into savagery (Marks 2008:334).

There are many other insights. Marks describes how hard it is for a visitor to resist the surface charm of the island. There are echoes here of hostage theory (Stanley & Goddard 1995). In fact, one police officer said that what occurred was 'like Stockholm Syndrome'. Someone else said that the men '... are the most powerful people on the island, and if you are not with them, God help you' (Marks 2008: 252).

As Marks points out, however, sexual abuse occurs everywhere, but:

> ... it thrives in secluded places. It is furtive and shameful; it happens out of sight. And it is often linked with problems that are typical of isolated areas: poverty and ignorance, alienation, narrow cultural and social horizons (Marks 2008:335).

As I started Kathy Marks' book, it was announced that the victims of this child sexual abuse would receive compensation from the British government, with victims of abuse from 1961 onwards eligible (Hirsch 2008).

There is also much in this book for those interested in journalism. Marks was, to all intents and purposes, 'embedded' in the community. At times, for example when she needed to use the boat, her life depended on the very perpetrators she was exposing.

This is a disturbing book on many levels. Many children were seriously damaged. The abuse occurred on a remote island rarely visited. The isolation of the children was total. The adults who could have assisted the children, and protected them, remained silent.

Marks states that many questions still challenge her:

> Why is it that many outsiders persisted in defending men who were guilty of a crime that was normally reviled: paedophilia? Why did they continue to mythologise Pitcairn, although it had failed ... to live up to its Utopian image? How far back ... did the sexual abuse stretch – to the time of the mutineers? Why had parents not denounced the perpetrators and kept their children safe? Had anyone outside the island realised what was going on? (Marks 2008:3).

These questions will resonate very close to home. Michael McKenna in *The Australian* has been covering the case of a teacher at a Queensland Catholic primary school who allegedly abused 13 girls (see, for example, McKenna 2008). In 2007, McKenna reports, a Year Four girl told her parents and then the school principal of the 'touching' by the teacher. It is alleged that no report was made to police or anyone else:

> Over the next year, at least 12 other girls, some who naively tried at times to disguise themselves to avoid the teacher's attention, allegedly suffered an onslaught of abuse. This involved vaginal and anal digital penetration and oral sex, as they were each called to the teachers desk or held back after class. It came to light only when another girl went directly to police with her allegations of abuse, 14 months after the first girl made the complaint to the school ... (McKenna 2009:13).

Marks refers to other scandals: the so-called spiritual community Centrepoint in New Zealand, the cult of the 'Little Pebble' in New South Wales, and the self-appointed leader of the Swan Valley Nyungah camp in Perth.

That is what is particularly disturbing about this book. It is clear that even in the late 20th or early 21st century, it is possible to abuse large numbers of children, silence the victims, and maintain secrecy for long periods.

Pitcairn is an isolated island but the abuse is not an isolated example of the cruel sexual exploitation of children. There are many adults, even on mainland Australia, who cover up such abuse.

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Chris Goddard's latest book, with Linda Briskman and Susie Latham, *Human Rights Overboard: Seeking Asylum in Australia* (Scribe, 2008), was awarded the Human Rights Literature Non-Fiction Award.

AFTER THE ORPHANAGE

Suellen Murray, John Murphy, Elizabeth Branidan and Jenny Malone
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Over the past decade, a number of government reports, including most notably the 2004 Forgotten Australians study, have brought the experiences of Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care to public attention.

This book by four Victorian academics builds on these earlier reports by documenting the specific experiences of 40 people who grew up in Catholic orphanages in Victoria and left care between 1945 and 1983. Twenty-one were men and nineteen were women, with their ages varying from 42 to 75 years. Some were in care from birth until they left at 14 years of age, others were in care for shorter periods. But all spent at least three years in care, and over half were in care for at least ten years.

In contrast to the Forgotten Australians study, which painted an overwhelmingly negative picture of out-of-home care, the experiences of this group appear to have been very diverse. Some enjoyed supportive placements and moved successfully into mainstream employment, social networks and loving relationships. Others were disempowered and even traumatised by their time in care, and left with serious health and emotional deficits.

The book begins with a discussion of the first day they left care. Some experienced an abrupt and sudden departure from a large, regimented institution to a liberating but scary outside world with little or no safety net. Some described this accelerated transition to independence as cruel and rejecting. But others were given more planned and caring transitions, and moved into structured apprenticeships or domestic service positions. Those who left care in the earlier post-war period found a vibrant labour market with lots of opportunities for young workers, but later care leavers in the 1970s seem to have encountered greater barriers to workforce entry.

The second chapter explores the range of reasons why they entered care. None were legally orphans. One contributing factor was the death or serious ill-health of the mother, many of whom suffered from psychiatric illness. Another factor was illegitimacy given the stigma of unmarried motherhood, and the absence of financial support. This situation would change in the early 1970s with the introduction of the Single Mothers' Pension. A third factor was family breakdown and/or desertion. And a fourth factor was neglect, generally associated with alcoholism, family violence and/or poverty.

Most of the children had some contact with members of their family whilst in care, but often contact with unmarried or