

FLETCHER CHRISTIAN AND THE ANCIENT MARINER.

A REFUTATION

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND and appreciate a poem, we must know the contemporary influences on the poet and how they affected him. But the critics who choose to take this historical approach in interpreting a poem may be too narrow in their analysis. This method sometimes proves faulty and the result may even become ludicrous. Such would appear to be the "forced" interpretation of Coleridge's poem by Neal B. Houston in his article "Fletcher Christian and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'".¹ Houston asserts that Christian, like the Mariner, committed a grievous act and that for it he was punished by being a social outcast for the rest of his life. However plausible this interpretation may appear, it does have a serious pitfall: Christian could not have roamed the earth telling his story as did the Mariner, because accounts prove that Fletcher Christian died on Pitcairn Island. This paper will present documentation refuting Houston's thesis that Christian returned to England, and it will analyse some of the other bases upon which this interpretation is founded.

As the crux of his argument, Houston cites a footnote in Sir John Barrow's book, *A Description of Pitcairn Island*:

About the years 1808 and 1809 a very general opinion was prevalent in the neighborhood of the lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland, that Christian was in that part of the country, and made frequent private visits to an aunt who was living there. . . . This, however, might be passed over as mere gossip had not another circumstance happened just about the same time. . . .

In Fore-street, Plymouth Dock, Captain Heywood [one of the *Bounty* mutineers acquitted at the trial] found himself one day walking behind a man whose shape had so much the appearance of Christian's that he involuntarily quickened his pace. Both were walking very fast, and the rapid steps behind him having roused the stranger's attention, he suddenly turned his face, looked at Heywood, and immediately ran off. . . .

That Christian should be in England Heywood considered as *highly im-*

probable [emphasis supplied] though not out of the scope of possibility; for at this time no account of him whatsoever had been received since they parted at Otaheite. . . .²

Thus, Houston considers this account to be definitive, despite the facts that there was no actual communication between Heywood and Christian but only a brief glimpse ("Heywood always referred to the incident as a 'coincidence'")³ and that it was merely a rumour that Fletcher Christian was living in Cumberland.

Contrary to these accounts are the statements issued by the captains of ships that visited Pitcairn Island. Here they encountered the last English survivor of the original colony of mutineers, Alexander Smith (alias John Adams), and the native women and children (the progeny of the mutineers). Smith's descriptions of the happenings surrounding the demise of Fletcher Christian, though attacked for being inconsistent, all agree that Christian did die on the island.

An early missive concerning the fate of the *Bounty* mutineers is a letter written by Captain Mayhew Folger in Nantucket on March 1, 1813. Here the commander of the American whaling ship *Topaz* provides testimony of Christian's death.

After discoursing with them [the Otaheitan natives on Pitcairn Island] a short time, I landed with them, and found an Englishman of the name of Alexander Smith, who informed me that he was one of the *Bounty's* crew⁴, and that, after putting Captain Bligh in the boat, with half the ship's company, they returned to Otaheite, where part of the crew chose to tarry; but Mr. Christian, with eight others including himself, preferred going to a more remote place; and, after making a short stay at Otaheite, where they took wives, and six man servants, they proceeded to Pitcairn Island, where they destroyed the ship, after taking everything out of her which they thought would be useful to them. About six years after they landed at this place, their servants attacked and killed all the English, excepting the informant, and he was severely wounded. The same night, the Otaheitan widows arose and murdered all their countrymen, leaving Smith, with the widows and children, where he had resided ever since without being resisted.⁵

Folger's letter, however, does not coincide with the diary of Amasa Delano, a friend and fellow whaler. He relates that according to Folger "they lived under Christian's government several years after they landed; that during the whole period they enjoyed tolerable harmony; that Christian became sick and died a natural death; and that it was after this that the Otaheitan men

joined in a conspiracy and killed the English husbands of the Otaheitan women, and were by the widows killed in return on the following night."⁶

Folger's inconsistent accounts also contradict those of one of the crew members of the *Topaz*. In a letter sent to the Admiralty from Valparaiso on October 10, 1808, Lieutenant William Fitzmaurice, quoting from the log book of the *Topaz*, September 29, 1808, describes the death of Fletcher Christian. "The second mate of the *Topaz* asserts that Christian, the ring leader, became insane shortly after their arrival on the island, and threw himself off the rocks into the sea . . ." (Barrow, p. 248). Although the statements of Folger and the second mate do not agree, they do attest to the fact that Christian was dead.

After Folger's visit to Pitcairn, other naval vessels happened upon the tiny island. In 1814 two British frigates, the H.M.S. *Briton* and H.M.S. *Tagus*, landed, and their commanders, Sir Thomas Staines and Captain Pipon, interrogated Alexander Smith concerning the *Bounty*. This time, however, Smith was fearful of his countrymen and reluctant to answer the officers. His description of Christian became coloured and distorted. In Smith's opinion, according to Captain Pipon,

. . . this misguided and ill-fated young man was never happy after the rash and criminal step he had taken; that he was always sullen and morose, and committed so many acts of wanton oppression as very soon incurred the hatred and detestation of his companions in crime, over whom he practised that same overbearing conduct of which he accused his commander Bligh. The object he had in view when he last left Otaheite had now been accomplished; he had discovered an uninhabited island out of the common track of ships, and established himself and his associates; so far there was a chance that he escaped all pursuit; but there was no escaping from [his conscience].

The fate of this misguided young man, brought on by his ill treatment of both his associates and the Indians . . . was such as might be expected — he was shot by an Otaheitan while digging in his field, about eleven months after they had settled on the island, and his death was only the commencement of feuds and assassinations, which ended in total destruction of the whole party except Adams (Barrow, pp. 253-4).

Despite his inconsistent description of Christian's behaviour, Smith (assuming the alias of John Adams in the presence of the two British naval officers) does not veer from his declaration that Christian was killed by one of the natives. In a letter by Staines, the commander of the *Briton* succinctly mentions that "Christian fell a sacrifice to the jealousy of an Otaheitan man,

remains; but because of the acknowledged high moral conduct of Smith¹⁰, it can be safely assumed that he was telling the truth.

Thus the story of Fletcher Christian and the *Bounty* mutineers is easily ascertained. The insurmountable problems of the English colony, the shortage of women, and the two different races with their separate modes of living brought about the failure of the settlement.¹¹ Forced to relinquish their women, the natives rebelled against the Englishmen. Then with weapons they stole from the mutineers they massacred all the *Bounty* settlers with the exception of Alexander Smith.¹² And it is from this lone survivor's eye-witness description (as related to the seamen) that we may accurately reconstruct the history of the mutineers on Pitcairn Island.

Although Houston's thesis is refuted by the evidence against his assertion that Coleridge used Fletcher Christian, an examination of the "proof" that he employs gives further demonstration of the unstable ground upon which his argument is founded.

Throughout the article Houston uses such phrases as "was believed", "was probably engaged", and "may well have been", all implying that conjecture rather than fact is being presented. By citing C. S. Wilkinson's book as the basis for his article, Houston chose a text whose thesis is also based on speculation: Wilkinson *believes* that Christian was hidden in the northwest section of Cumberland and that "he *was probably engaged* (emphasis supplied) in maritime traffic at Anthorne in the Lake Country" (p. 432). Houston also notes a passage from the most extensive scholarly work on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", *The Road to Xanadu* by John Livingston Lowes. However, Lowes also lapses into mere conjecture when analyzing the brief entry in Coleridge's notebook in which Christian's name is mentioned. He acknowledges that "Coleridge, like his contemporaries, could only guess" the fate of Fletcher Christian. But he also says "there was at least one sentence in Bligh's matter-of-fact narrative which *must have leaped from the page* as Coleridge read — a sentence opposite which in the margin *we can almost see him noting . . .*"¹³ Lowes, too, degenerates to fanciful thought from the usual high quality of scholarship of his seminal work.

Besides substituting conjecture for fact, Houston argues by analogy that Fletcher Christian is the Ancient Mariner. Again he quotes Lowes to substantiate his point: "The adventures of Christian the mutineer, as Coleridge conceived them, *may well have been*, like those of the guilt haunted Mariner himself . . ." ¹³ Houston accepts this statement as being conclusive and offers

examples from Coleridge's life and from the poem itself for support. He maintains that the route of the ship in the argument of the 1798 edition of "The Ancient Mariner" is more like Christian's than Bligh's because Bligh returned to England without being a guilty man. Christian, however, committed a crime and, like the Mariner, must do penance for it.¹⁴ Moreover, he asserts "Like the Mariner, Christian was 'a soul in agony', having come to this end [being a social outcast] by an act that was also like the act of the Mariner — an act begun in impetuosity and ending in isolation" (p. 436). Both the Mariner and Fletcher Christian went against the authority of a king: Christian broke the law of the British navy established by Richard I, and the Mariner violated the law of nature (God's law) by killing the albatross, "a symbol of the order of nature" (p. 436.) Houston declares that both men "must have felt" a sense of remorse and fear from their impulsive actions; and also that like the Mariner, Christian is forced to lead a life-in-death. After presenting these interesting historical analogies, Houston attempts to convince the reader by offering another historical tidbit. He dogmatically says (without proof, however, for his statement) that "when the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared in 1798, Coleridge had achieved a penetrating insight, as well as sympathetic interest, into the nature and the understanding of the guilt of the Ancient Mariner; it appears that he covertly knew more about the subject than the ordinary citizen, and knew enough about Christian's guilt so that the 'hooks and eyes' of his imagination would reflect the psychology of the guilt in the lines of the poem itself" (p. 438). While such information is interesting, it can hardly be considered valid or even credible without factual substantiation.

Houston then posits that by using "subtle linguistic items" Coleridge reveals the identity of Christian as the Ancient Mariner. The Scottish word for church, "kirk", is apparently used for indicating that the Mariner is in some way associated with Scotland. Since Christian was a Manxman, says Houston, Coleridge is suggesting this location to the reader by the use of a word common to Christian's birthplace.¹⁵ The albatross, being a representative of God, also provides a clue to the identity of the Mariner. The bird, like Christ, was killed, and so Coleridge, it is argued, is also suggesting the name Christian. Finally, Houston states, "The word 'Fletcher' is the archaic word for 'one who makes or deals in arrows' or 'one who makes bows and arrows'" (p. 439). The albatross, being shot with a cross-bow, would disclose the Mariner's human equivalent, Fletcher Christian. Such reasoning, however scholarly it may seem, is weak because it ludicrously reduces Coleridge's poem to an anagram.

Much of Houston's argument for the probability that Christian was

Coleridge's model for the *Ancient Mariner* results from Coleridge's close association with Wordsworth. According to Houston, "Wilkinson maintains that the person who suggested to Coleridge that Christian be used as a model for 'The Ancient Mariner' must fulfil two conditions: (1) he must be in close contact with the mutineer so as to be trusted with the story of his return, and (2) he must be on intimate terms with Coleridge. Obviously, writes Wilkinson, William Wordsworth fulfils both conditions, for he was a schoolmate of Fletcher Christian, had close ties with the Christian family, and was originally a collaborator with Coleridge in planning 'The Ancient Mariner'" (pp. 432-3). It is a fact that Wordsworth was a friend and schoolmate of Christian's, but I believe that Wilkinson and Houston are assuming too much when they attribute to Wordsworth the suggestion that Fletcher Christian be used as a model for the poem. Wordsworth, in his memoirs, narrates the incident of the conception of "The Ancient Mariner":

While walking through the Quantock Hills was planned the poem of the "Ancient Mariner", founded on a dream, as Mr. Coleridge said, of his friend Mr. Cruikshank. Much the greatest part of the story was Mr. Coleridge's invention; but certain parts I suggested; for example, some crime was committed which should bring upon the Old Navigator, as Coleridge afterwards delighted to call him, the spectral persecution, as a consequence of that crime and his own wanderings. I had been reading in Shelvocke's *Voyages*, a day or two before, that, while doubling Cape Horn, they frequently saw albatrosses in that latitude, the largest sort of sea-fowl, some extending their wings twelve to thirteen feet. "Suppose", said I, "you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary spirits of these regions take upon them to avenge the crime." The incident was thought fit for the purpose, and adopted accordingly. I also suggested the navigation of the ship by the dead men, but do not recollect that I had anything more to do with the scheme of the poem.¹⁶

Neither Christian nor the *Bounty* was mentioned at the time of the original idea of the poem. Therefore there is no reason to believe that Coleridge drastically changed his original concept of "The Ancient Mariner" to accommodate the facts surrounding the *Bounty* mutiny and its leader.

Houston also accepts as truth the supposition that indeed Wordsworth is the man who fulfils Wilkinson's requirements. Perhaps Coleridge himself would better fit the pattern. George Whalley presents this idea in his essay "The Mariner and the Albatross", in which he analyzes how Coleridge's inner life is revealed in the poem.¹⁷ Whalley maintains that "the 'haunting quality' grows from our intimate experiences in the poem of the most intense personal

suffering, perplexity, loneliness, longing, horror, fear. . . . Whether or not he recognized this process at the time, Coleridge enshrined in *The Ancient Mariner* the quintessence of himself, of his suffering and dread, his sense of sin, his remorse, his powerlessness. For it is not only a crystallization of his personal experience up to the time of the composition of the first version, but also an appalling prophecy fulfilled to great extent in his life and successively endorsed by his own hand as time passed." Whalley also asserts that the albatross was "the symbol of Coleridge's creative imagination, his eagle", rather than only a nature symbol. This interpretation also draws an analogy and may therefore be dismissed as invalid just as Houston's was. If, however, an historical parallel is to be drawn between an actual person and the Ancient Mariner, analogy cannot be avoided. Thus it becomes a question of credibility and factual support, and in this regard Whalley's interpretation proves more satisfactory than Houston's.

No one can dogmatically assert exactly what Coleridge "means" in the poem. Nor can it be authoritatively stated that the poet actually had a person in mind while constructing the figure of the Ancient Mariner. Houston's article succumbs to both of these temptations, and as a result gives a pseudo-academic and quasi-historical interpretation to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

NOTES

1. Neal B. Houston, "Fletcher Christian and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'", *The Dalhousie Review*, XLV (1966), p. 430. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.
2. Sir John Barrow, *A Description of Pitcairn Island and Its Inhabitants With an Authentic Account of the Mutiny of the Ship BOUNTY and of the Subsequent Fortunes of the Mutineers* (New York: A. L. Fowle, 1900), p. 267.
3. C. S. Wilkinson, *The Wake of the BOUNTY* (London: Cassell, 1953), p. 110.
4. It is significant to note that Smith volunteered the information that he was a part of the mutiny rather than deny the fact. He does not, then, indicate fear of being returned to England and tried for his actions.
5. "His Majesty's Ship BOUNTY — Descendants of the Mutineers", *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXV, p. 598.
6. Alexander McKee, *H.M.S. BOUNTY* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1962), p. 199.
7. Lieutenant J. Shilibeer, "A Narrative of the Briton's Voyage to Pitcairn Island;

Including an Interesting Sketch of the Present State of the Brazils and Spanish South America", *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXVII, p. 341.

8. In his book Wilkinson claims that "Adams never would give his interrogators the final proof of his good faith by pointing out the site of Christian's grave, and always evaded the question of its whereabouts" (p. 117). This is one of Wilkinson's major arguments supporting the idea that Christian did not die on Pitcairn Island, but returned to England.
9. Lady Diana Belcher, *The Mutineers of the BOUNTY and Their Descendants in Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands* (New York: Harper, 1871), p. 175.
10. In all accounts by the seamen visiting Pitcairn Island, Smith's moral leadership of the natives was noted. Like Christian, Smith converted the Otaheitans to Christianity and lived in strict accordance with the *Book of Common Prayer*.
11. Bengt Danielsson, *What Happened on the BOUNTY* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), p. 218.
12. The natives attempted to kill Smith too. He was shot through the neck and managed to escape to the forest until the insurrection subsided.
13. J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), pp. 26, 27; (emphasis supplied).
14. Houston, p. 435. Again Houston conjectures that "although it is not known exactly how Christian returned to England, it is a reasonable conjecture that he bore an overpowering sense of guilt."
15. Houston, p. 438. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography* Christian's ancestors were from the Isle of Man, but he was born at Moorland Close in Cockermouth, Cumberland.
16. Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (London: Edward Moxon, 1851), Vol. I in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Royal Gettmann (Belmont, Calif., 1961), p. 45.
17. George Whalley, "The Mariner and the Albatross", *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, XVI (July, 1947) in Royal Gettmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 84, 86.