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**Robb Robinson: The *Bounty* (Vignette).**

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## **The *Bounty***

The shipbuilding firm owned by the Blaydes family built the *Bethia* in their North End Yard on the River Hull, close to their base at Blaydes House, High Street (now Hull University's Maritime Historical Studies Centre). The *Bethia* was an 85-foot-long, three-masted wooden sailing vessel deployed in carrying cargoes around the North Sea. In 1787, she was purchased by the Admiralty for £1950, fitted out for a voyage to the South Seas and renamed *Bounty*. The expedition was designed to collect breadfruit from Tahiti, and transport them to the West Indies, to be planted and grown as food for plantation slaves in another corner of the British Empire.

*Bounty* was smaller than either *Endeavour* or *Resolution*, which had been commanded by Captain James Cook on earlier South Seas voyages. *Bethia* had been worked by fifteen men in her role as a merchant vessels. But after being modified at Deptford Royal Dockyard, His Majesty's Armed Vessel *Bounty* sailed from Spithead for the Pacific on 23 December 1787, under the command of Lieutenant William Bligh, with a 46-strong crew in cramped and overcrowded conditions.

The story that unfolded is now the stuff of maritime legend. After a ten-month voyage in atrocious conditions, featuring an aborted attempted to round Cape Horn, the exhausted ship's company dropped anchor off Tahiti in late October 1788. They spent the following five months collecting breadfruit in what seemed like a tropical paradise—a complete contrast to the hardships of the voyage. Strong relationships were forged between the seafarers and Tahitians, and many crew members were reluctant to leave when their overcrowded ship, now stacked with breadfruit, sailed in early April 1789.

Once back on board tensions intensified. Three and a half weeks later, Fletcher Christian and some armed companions seized HMAV *Bounty*, and forced Bligh, and eighteen of those who remained loyal to him, into the ship's launch (a large rowing boat). They then threw the breadfruit overboard and returned to Tahiti. Later, Christian and nine of the mutineers, together with eighteen Tahitians, including eleven women, sailed southwards, finally settling on remote Pitcairn Island where they ransacked and burned the *Bounty*. Meanwhile, against all odds, Bligh pulled off an amazing feat of seamanship by covering over 3,500 nautical miles in 47 days in the oar-powered launch to reach the Dutch settlement at Timor. Another naval expedition was later sent to capture the mutineers who had remained on Tahiti, ten of whom were court martialled, with three executed for committing acts of piracy and mutiny. But the whereabouts of Christian and those who sailed south remained a mystery for many years. In the event, all bar one of them died violent deaths, but their descendants still live on Pitcairn Island.

Bligh led another expedition to Tahiti and successfully transported breadfruit to the West Indies. Later, he carried out important hydrographical work, which included charting the shifting channels and sandbanks of the Humber estuary. Little remains of the *Bounty* today, but more than 240 years after *Bethia* was first launched into the River Hull the story still attracts considerable global attention, not least because the reasons why the mutiny took place have been disputed by contemporaries, historians, authors and film makers ever since the fateful events of 28 April 1789.

**Robb Robinson**