

# “Joshua Hill, the Self-Instituted King of Pitcairn Island: Separating the Truth from the Lies”

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Tillman W. Nechtman  
Associate Professor  
British & British Imperial History  
Department of History  
Skidmore College  
Saratoga Springs, NY

On October 28, 1832, an enigmatic man, then aged fifty-nine, landed at Pitcairn Island. It was a Sunday. Joshua W. Hill had sailed from Tahiti, more than 1,300 nautical miles to the northeast of the tiny Pacific island best known as the home to the descendants of the mutineers from HMAV *Bounty* and its ill-fated breadfruit mission under Lieutenant William Bligh. There is no record of Hill's actual landing in Bounty Bay, though we know quite a great deal about what Hill made of things on the island upon first entering Adamstown. He did not care for what he found. The island, he later noted, was “in the greatest state of irregularity.” Most of the islanders were drunk, including one “Englishman” by the name of George Hunn Nobbs, who was the island's pastor.

If we believe Hill and his partisans, what happened next was simple. He convinced the Pitcairners that they were in need of reform, volunteering his services as an agent of change at the island. Hill's detractors, though, tell a different story. George Nobbs would later recall that Hill announced that he had been sent in an

official capacity by London to “adjust the internal affairs of the island.”

Furthermore, his authority was buttressed by “British ships of war on the coast [that] were under his direction.”

There were, of course, no boats. There were no orders. Though Joshua Hill had tried to convince the British Government and the London Missionary Society to involve him in several salvic plans for Pitcairn Island, neither had done so. He seems, therefore, to have arrived on the island of his own accord. He was but one man, and yet, from 1832 until his removal from the island late in 1837, Joshua Hill ruled at Pitcairn as the island’s high priest, its president, and its school teacher. As a veritable dictator over the Pitcairners, he would attempt to reform their system of land ownership, he would institute a temperance society, he would break up stills and found schools. He established new religious policies, and he sought to reform the manners of a community of people whose moral fate, he believed, was on the brink. He managed, in short, to dislodge Pitcairn from any authorized form of British colonial control, and this at a moment when the empire more broadly was nearing its global heyday.

But, who was Joshua W. Hill? Where exactly had he come from? Why did he decide that Pitcairn ought to be the ultimate target of his “philanthropic tour among the island in the Pacific”? Few who have looked at the history of Pitcairn Island have ventured to ask any of these, admittedly basic, questions about this very interesting man. Nearly everyone who *has* written about Hill’s sojourn at Pitcairn has tended to assume that all of his claims were lies, and they have concluded, as a result, that it is nearly impossible to know much about this Pacific mountebank.

I want to start from a different premise. Let us imagine that there is more to this story than one imposter, three score gullible Pacific islanders, and a half decade of British colonial neglect on London's part. Let us assume that Joshua Hill was connected to bigger colonial concerns, as he claimed he was, that he did have global connections, and that his arrival at Pitcairn was part of a larger, if still idiosyncratic, sense of how to reform and refortify British imperialism around the globe. Let us assume, in short, that Joshua Hill had a reason to go to Pitcairn. After all, in 1832 as today, one does not end up at Pitcairn Island by accident.

Sir George Elliott has left us with what may be the only image of Joshua Hill. It is a faded, vague, pencil drawing that shows an older man with a balding scalp, flabby jowls, and small round glasses. The picture is labeled "Joshua Hill: The Self-Instituted King of Pitcairn Island," and that label is telling, for it implies a certain lunacy on Hill's part. He's crazy; he's a madman; he thinks he is a king. To be sure, Hill's governance at Pitcairn lacked any form of authority other than that which Hill himself asserted, so on one level, he was a "self-instituted king." But, was he actually crazy? Nearly every person who has written on Hill has assumed that the answer is yes. Most go so far as to brandish words like megalomaniac, paranoid, delusional, and eccentric in reference to Hill and his time at Pitcairn.

The objective record here is rather clear. Hill's authoritarian regime at Pitcairn was so abusive that the islanders were better off rid of him when he was packed onboard HMS *Imogene* by Captain Bruce late in 1837 and removed to Valparaiso. But, before we dismiss Hill as a mere madman, perhaps we would do well to compare him to other men who claimed leadership status at Pitcairn, say, for

example, the venerable George Hunn Nobbs. Here, I am following a pattern established by Raymond Nobbs, who has written a biography of George Nobbs, who also happens to be Raymond Nobbs' great-great-grandfather. When he arrived at Pitcairn on October 28, 1828 (four years to the day before Hill's arrival), George Nobbs' background was no less dubious than Hill's.

As would Hill, Nobbs told extravagant stories about himself when he landed for the first time, stories that included his being the illegitimate son of a British nobleman. There was no proof to his claims. Indeed, there were more questions than anything else. Who was he really? Who was his American companion, Noah Bunker? How had the two men come by their vessel and sailed it to Pitcairn? Why had they done so? By what authority did Nobbs offer his services as teacher to the islanders? After all, Pitcairn already had a teacher in John Buffett, whose arrival five years before was also somewhat murky. The old adage, however, tells us that history gets written by the victors, and, in Pitcairn's history, George Hunn Nobbs *is* a victor. His esteemed leadership of the island in the 1840s, his celebrated trip to London in the early 1850s to be ordained an Anglican priest (a trip that included an audience with Queen Victoria at Osborne House), his role in the removal to Norfolk Island in 1856, and his continued leadership of the Pitcairn community there until his death in 1884 all serve to cloak the mysteries of his arrival and to legitimate his past.

In point of fact, to read Raymond Nobbs' biography of George Hunn Nobbs is to read a story that matches the biography Joshua Hill told about himself in striking detail. Both men had connections with missionary establishments in Britain; both

had served in naval capacities in the chaotic South American wars for independence; both had been in service in the east; both arrived at Pitcairn for dubious reasons and without any clear authority; both were unhappy with the way they found things; and both decided to take control of the island and its residents. All of these similarities, I would suggest, beg us to pay more attention to Joshua Hill than we've done thus far.

To get at Joshua Hill's biography is not as terribly difficult as we might at first imagine it would be. Hill, as many have noted before, was more than willing to talk about himself. The biographical claims he made for himself are legend. But, the key to unlocking Hill's past is to trust that the things he said about himself were true, even though we know that his claims to authority at Pitcairn were all lies. According to Captain Charles Freemantle of HMS *Challenger*, who touched at Pitcairn in 1833 only a few months after Hill's arrival, the *curriculum vitae* that Hill offered as his *bone fides* told the tale of a peripatetic sixty or so years. By his own admission, Hill had "in the course of a long life passed among the various foreign dependencies of Great Britain, visited many of the islands in the Pacific Ocean." His travels had brought him into contact and communication with the rich and the famous. He knew William Wilberforce as well as Captain J.W. Beechey, whose 1825 voyage on the *Blossom* had famously stopped at Pitcairn. He had, he boasted, "visited the four quadrants of the globe," and he had done so in style. He had lived and dined in palaces (and with no less than the likes of Madame Bonaparte and Lady Hamilton, mistress to the great Lord Nelson), he was friends with George IV and William IV, he had been a guest at meetings of the Royal Society and was an associate of its

president, Sir Joseph Banks (whose idea it had been to send Captain Bligh on his ill-fated breadfruit mission). He had published in some of the leading newspapers of the day and visited some of the great tourist destinations in South Asia and North America. He had sampled some of the finest wines at the tables of royal hosts across Europe, and he was (perhaps hypocritically) a member of various temperance societies. He had attended Napoleon's coronation. These were, at least, some of the claims he used to impress the Pitcairners.

There is hardly enough time here for me to recount all that I've found about Hill's pre-Pitcairn life, to say nothing of the on-going global manhunt that has been required to connect the dots Hill offered in his extravagant autobiographical accounts. I trust, then, that it will suffice to offer a quick glimpse into some of Hill's biography – at least the parts that I think I've confirmed as true (or likely to be true) – and then to offer some further reflections on what his biography tells us more broadly about the place of Pitcairn Island in nineteenth-century British imperial history.

Joshua Hill claimed to have been born on April 15, 1773 in colonial North America and that his father was an American loyalist – a man of property who lost everything as a result of his support for the crown in the Revolutionary crisis. Crown loyalists have received renewed attention thanks, in no small part, to Maya Jasanoff's recent book *Liberty's Exiles*, a book written with the help of the records left behind by the British government's efforts to remunerate loyalists for the losses they suffered in the service of the crown. The list of names included in those records includes many a *Hill*. Very few of them are men of any real property.

Indeed, none of them match the description Hill offers of his father's holdings prior to the American War or the timeline of his father's departure from North America. None, that is except one – a Delaware man by the name of *Joshua* Hill.

If Joshua Hill of Delaware was, in fact, our Joshua Hill's father, he was not originally a crown loyalist. Indeed, he served in the Delaware colonial (later state) legislature and was loyal to the Continental Congress up until 1778. In that year, he seems to have spoken, rather ill advisedly, about the Congress in critical terms whereupon a small, armed band was sent to arrest him for his disloyal and intemperate remarks. In the kerfuffle that followed, two of the soldiers sent against him were killed. Now having taken arms against the American cause, Hill fled to the British side, eventually leaving the rebellious colonies for Canada from whence he eventually traveled back to Britain.

None of the documents related to Delaware's Joshua Hill specifically mention a son named Joshua (though they do mention several sons), but then again none of the records would have been public in the 1830s for our Joshua Hill to have had access to them to concoct the connection between himself and this Revolutionary turn-coat. Could Hill have fabricated the connection? Yes, certainly. But, the overlap between his stories and this one loyalist's history would be uncanny, perhaps even improbable, if the two men did not share some familial connection.

Likewise, it is hard to confirm Hill's claim that he published in some of the leading newspapers of his day. His one concrete claim to fame was that he had written an essay on naval affairs that appeared in *The Morning Post* on March 7, 1811. A quick survey of the microfilm reels from this once venerable news source

verifies that there was a rather lengthy editorial essay on naval affairs published on that day. But, as was customary in the period, there was no by-line to the essay, and so we cannot know for certain whether it was written by Joshua Hill. Of course, Hill made his claim about this essay in the 1840s, leaving us again to wonder. How was his claim so accurate? Had he appreciated the essay when he first read it several decades before and remembered its publication details on the off chance he decided to use it in an elaborate autobiographical fib later on? Had he searched through the newspaper archives at the British Museum to add some historical flourish to his fables? Or, was the claim simply true? My inclination is to say that the simplest explanation – that the claim *is* true – may likely be the best one here.

If I cannot tell you about some parts of Hill's life with any certainty, I can be sure about other aspects of his life. Did he visit the four quadrants of the globe? Yes. By the time he arrived at Pitcairn Island in 1832, Joshua Hill had traveled in Europe, South America, North America, and East Asia. The archival record notes his presence in each place. Had he dined at palaces? Yes again. Records indicate that, at minimum, Hill dined at Brighton Pavilion at least once – on November 23, 1817 – as the guest of the Prince Regent, the future George IV. His younger brother, the future William IV, was a guest at the dinner. So, Hill had met these two British monarchs, even if his claim of friendship overstated the relationship.

Hill's claims to well-connected friendships went beyond the monarchy, though. His list of friends included the likes of Joseph Banks, and indeed, the collected letters from Banks' archive include letters from Dr. Sir Charles Blagden dated from the summer of 1802 that indicate that Blagden, the secretary to the

Royal Society, introduced one J. Hill to the *Institut de Francais* at Banks' request. Not only do these records prove that Hill knew Banks, they also confirm his claims to have been familiar with leading members of the Royal Society of Britain and a guest to similar learned societies across Europe.

Given that Hill claims to have lived in Paris for five years, his 1802 arrival in Paris means that he would have been in the city at the time of Napoleon's coronation in 1804. Even if he did not "attend" the event as an invited guest as his lofty claims suggest, he might well have been on hand to participate in the festivities. Similarly, given that Blagden records a visit to Madame Bonaparte only days after having introduced Hill at the *Institut*, it is not impossible to imagine that Hill's connected British associates won him some sort of admission to Josephine's home at the *Chateau de Malmaison*.

Not dissimilarly, East India Company records indicate that one Joshua Hill sailed onboard the East Indiaman *Bridgewater* in 1794. That ship sailed from India to China. In his own retelling, Joshua Hill was a crewman in the largest fleet ever to sail to the east, and while his estimation of the size of the convoy is inaccurate here, the dates of his claims match the Company's records. More significantly, this record confirms the employment claim that Hill was making to the Pitcairners when he told them he had worked for the East India Company. For ultimately, what Joshua Hill was doing when he rattled off this list of accomplishments was, yes, bragging to a degree, but also giving the islanders his *Curriculum Vitae* and his *bone fides* to govern over them. He wanted them to believe he was the kind of person London would have put in charge of Pitcairn Island, and he wanted them to believe he had

the credentials to do the job. It is not unreasonable to argue that Hill's various experiences in the Pacific on route to Pitcairn were exactly the sorts of things that London might have looked for in a potential colonial administrator or counselor officer, had London been looking for an administrator for Pitcairn.

When he arrived at Tahiti in January 1832, for instance, Hill found that George Pritchard was absent from the island. Pritchard, an agent for the London Missionary Society, had lived at Tahiti since 1824 and had become an invaluable advisor to Queen Pomare IV. In 1837, London would tap him to be the first official British consul to Tahiti. Indeed, word of his commission arrived via HMS *Imogene* and Captain Bruce, whose next stop would be Pitcairn to remove Joshua Hill. Without the guidance of George Pritchard, Queen Pomare was deeply engaged in what appeared to be a losing battle with Euro-American whalers who wanted permission to land at Tahiti in search of alcohol and sex. In letters to the British crown, Pomare noted that her government was in great need of London's support, particularly in the form of an official British agent. Pomare went so far as to name the person she felt best suited for the job, one Captain Joshua Hill, who had been working to help her secure the sovereign shores of her island during his recent residence. Of course, she understood that Captain Hill was on a bigger mission, and so her second choice, she made clear, would be the missionary, George Pritchard.

If it is true, then, that Hill assisted British interests at Tahiti during his stay there in 1831 and 1832 (he landed just after the Pitcairners returned from their disastrous removal to Tahiti), it is also true that he was able to support the missionary efforts of Hiram Bingham of the American Board of Commissioners for

Foreign Missions, who was as connected to the Hawaiian monarchy as was George Pritchard to the Tahitian. Surviving letters and diaries from Bingham indicate that Joshua Hill arrived in Honolulu in June 1831 just as a group of French Catholic missionaries were causing tensions both because the American missionaries feared for their evangelical turf and because the Hawaiian monarchy wanted to secure its sovereign borders against further European missionary intervention. When the Catholic priests demanded permission to land and establish themselves in the Hawaiian chain against the wishes of King Kamehameha III, it was Hill who was able to convince them that they would do well to seek souls on one of the many other Pacific islands where there was no missionary presence. It was his pragmatic sense that the American missionaries under Bingham were doing the same work that the Catholics hoped to do – and not the claims to sovereignty offered by the Hawaiians or the outrage expressed by Bingham and his associates – that finally convinced the French priests and, thereby, averted potential conflict. It was a situation that required a neutral arbiter, and Hill played that part perfectly.

Much of what Joshua Hill told the Pitcairn islanders about himself was, therefore, true. This has been the great biographical discovery of my research and of my willingness to believe a man I know to have been a liar – at least relative to that claim about his rights to administer at Pitcairn. A lot of history, though, gets lost between absolute truth and absolute fiction, and that middle ground is where we find a lot of Hill's biography. Did he, as he claimed, have a French cook? A box at the opera? Ride in the carriages of Dukes? Dine with governors, viceroys, and admirals? Visit Niagara Falls, the Natural Bridge in Virginia, or the Reciprocating

Fountain in Tennessee? Live for a time among the Seneca as a friend of the noted orator Red Jacket? Was he at the only performance to feature three generations of the famous French ballet dynasty the Vestrises?

In each of these instances, the answer is a definite maybe. These claims are all vague enough that to track them in the historical archive would be to hunt for ghosts. Take, for instance the claim about the Vestris family. The celebrated, French ballet dancer, Gaetano Vestris, returned from retirement in 1800 to dance one final performance alongside his son, Auguste, and his grandson, Armand, both of whom were well-respected dance legends in their own generations, at the *Opéra de Paris*. If we take Charles Blagden's claim that Hill had only just arrived in Paris in 1802, then we have to imagine that Hill traveled to Paris several times in his life. Did he? We probably will never know, though there is something again to be made for Hill's uncanny ability to make claims about his own past – that he had been at this most singular of ballet performances – that match the historical record so perfectly.

And that is just the point here. Each of Hill's claims resonates with what we know for certain about his biography just enough that it could be true. He did live in Paris for a time. So, it is not hard to imagine he had a French chef and a box at the Paris Opera. He dined at Brighton with the Prince Regent, so he may well have been part of social groups that included governors, viceroys, and admirals. If he was born in North America as he claims, then it is possible he saw Niagara Falls and what is now called the Reciprocating Spring in Tennessee, for these were hydraulic wonders to men of learning and science in the nineteenth century and tourist destinations for the broader public. Red Jacket lived near Niagara in Hill's lifetime, and so if he was

in that region, he may well have had at least some contact with the Seneca leader. To know for certain is all but impossible, and yet, when placed in the context of what we now know to be true about Hill's life, these claims seem less arrogant, less bombastic, and less, well, insane. Indeed, they are all distinctly probable.

What I have sketched here is a brief survey of my, admittedly, early efforts to write as definitive a biography of Joshua Hill as I possibly can. But, what does this research tell us more broadly? Is there any value to knowing Hill beyond simply filling in details about a brief six-year period in the history of a very small Pacific island? I think the answer is that there *is* more to this story. Hill, not unlike George Hunn Nobbs, targeted Pitcairn. He had written letters to the Government and to the London Missionary Society about the island prior to his voyage there. He had tracked the efforts to remove the islanders to Tahiti, at least enough that he knew to sail for Tahiti in 1831 rather than to Pitcairn. But, why? What attracted men with such global experience, with connections to Britain's world-wide empire, with friends in high places, and with the power to go wherever they wanted to Pitcairn? I think Hill's biography begins to help us frame some answers.

Obviously, Pitcairn was famous for its romantic connection to the events onboard the *Bounty* in April 1789. In the nineteenth century, it was also romanticized in broader imperial ways. Nearly every account of the island – whether by visiting sailor or historical author – told a tale in which the founding act of mutiny and the subsequent brutal crimes – the kidnapping of the Tahitian women or the murderous events of 1793 that witnessed the deaths of so many of the island's male population – were expunged by the utopian world that Alexander

Smith/John Adams (here we find another person willing to tell tales about his past) had forged in the years between 1793 and 1808, when the American ship *Topaz* came upon the island. Nearly every nineteenth-century account of Pitcairn tells of a religious paradise. John Orelbar, sailing as a midshipman aboard HMS *Seringapatam* under Captain Waldegrave, had a chance to observe Pitcairn in 1830 and can serve as an example. "It was delightful to meet every-where," he wrote,

With the clear brow and smiling countenance of health and content; their happiness centered in the bosom of their families; and all the capabilities of living comfortable within their reach; - hallowed by religion, their lives must be one continued stream of uninterrupted pleasures.

If, as Patty O'Brien has argued elsewhere, it is almost possible to tell the entire history of the Pacific – at least as the west has viewed it – with and upon the eroticized bodies of Pacific women, that story falters at Pitcairn. Few (if any) of those who commented on Pitcairn in the early-nineteenth century cared one bit about the Tahitian women. This was the story of Adams and his redemptive work and the story of the half-English/half-Tahitian off-spring of the mutineers who had adopted the Englishman Adams as their patriarch. There was, to be sure, a celebration of the Pacific as exotic and luxurious in all of this – a hint of the myth of the noble savage. But, the Pitcairners were hardly "savages" in any traditional sense, though neither were they fully British. Indeed, in so far as they were British, they were heirs to the criminal acts of mutiny, murder, and kidnapping. In a way that was peculiar to their island, then, the Pitcairnese people demonstrated the powerful consequences wrought by the confluence of the nobility of Tahitian savagery, the exoticism of the South Seas, and the reforming influences of western

Christianity and colonial administration that lifted the descendants of the mutiny from their fathers' criminal pasts, transforming an island that might otherwise have been written off as the last refuge of scoundrels into its own semi-utopian space – the home of a singular people, the Pitcairners. It was a great imperial story.

For a man like Joshua Hill who was alert to the full scope and power of the British empire, to the geopolitics of international imperial competition, to the ins and outs of naval command, to the vicissitudes of court politics, and the whims of aristocratic influence, Pitcairn Island was, then, the ideal symbol for the British empire more broadly. It brought into focus issues of class and race, redemption and reform, overseas power and colonial control, and it coupled all of these themes to a captivating historical narrative and a romantic South Seas adventure. It had been Britain's second (though unintentional and, for many years, unknown) Pacific colony after Australia, and it was one of the most securely loyal Pacific colonies at a time when British imperial might was imperiled in that ocean not only by French colonial aggression but also by the growing power of the Tsarist empire in Russia and the growing American presence in the Pacific.

In an age when the Pacific mattered as perhaps *the* central geography in the Euro-American imperial scramble, Pitcairn was disproportionately important in these larger geo-imperial concerns relative to its size and population. When we reflect more purposefully on the life and career – no matter how misguided – of Joshua Hill, we find that Pitcairn was not only *a* logical target for a worldly colonial traveler like Captain Hill – or, for that matter, any of the other individuals, groups, or societies who came to focus on the welfare of Pitcairn and its residents in the mid-

nineteenth century. It was, arguably, the *perfect* target, for Pitcairn's history was a narrative of the great possibilities of British imperialism set on an island whose story everyone was eager to hear. It was the perfect stage for a colonial administrator – sane or otherwise – who wanted to stand in the global imperial spotlight.