

**The West Australian: Big Weekend
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PANDORA'S BOXED SET

A voyage Round The World in His Majesty's Frigate Pandora

The Pandora left England in November 1790. After calling in at Teneriffe and Rio de Janeiro, it rounded Cape Horn in late January and, on the morning of March 23, 1791, dropped anchor in Matavy Bay, Otaheety (Tahiti).

Under the command of Capt. Edward Edwards, a hard, determined man, the Pandora had been sent on her long journey for a specific purpose. The fourteen Bounty mutineers found on Tahiti were soon wearing chains, imprisoned in the insanitary 4x5m box Edwards had built on the quarter deck.

In mid-May Edwards and the Pandora began a search of the islands to the west of Tahiti. But Fletcher Christian, with eight other mutineers and the Tahitians who accompanied them, had taken the Bounty eastward - leaving their pursuers to brood over their whereabouts for almost two decades.

After investigating the islands of Samoa and Tonga, and having lost two search parties and their boats (one lot sailed independently to Timor, a feat equal to Bligh's of 1789), Edwards set a course for Torres Strait.

There, on "an exceedingly dark, stormy night" at the end of August, the Pandora struck a coral outcrop.

It sank just before dawn, taking to their deaths 31 of the crew and four mutineers, still chained inside the ghastly box. According to the ship surgeon George Hamilton's account, 102 survivors set out in four open boats for Timor, where they arrived two weeks later.

Edwards ultimately landed his catch of 10 Bounty mutineers back to England in June 1792. In October of the following year three - including Tom Ellison, an innocent boy - were hanged.

A good deal of what we know about the voyage of the Pandora and the adventures of those who sailed in it, derives from Hamilton's brisk account published in 1793.

Historians have been fortunate to have had an observer as clear-eyed as Hamilton.

He understood and conscientiously described the true and "fatal" nature of the European impact in the South Seas.

"Happy would it have been for those people" he wrote, "had they never been visited by Europeans, for, to our shame be it spoken, disease and gunpowder is all the benefit they have received from us, in return for their hospitality and kindness".

Hamilton did not need to be a doctor to see "the ravages of the venereal disease", and he noted that consumption (TB) had lately "made great havoc" among the Tahitians, who called it "the English disease".

As often as not, the havoc and fatalities were rather more immediate. A man on Tonga (the Friendly Islands!) was so entranced by an Englishman's handkerchief as to be tempted to bludgeon its owner. Avoiding the islander's club, Lieut. Comer "levelled his piece and shot him dead".

Hamilton's descriptions of Polynesian weapons and other artefacts collected by the crew of the Pandora have given archaeologists an unprecedented reference in identifying material recovered from the wreck.

In fact, a remark in Hamilton's text provided the vital clue to locating the Pandora in 1977. Since 1982 the Queensland Museum has been excavating the remarkably well-preserved vessel and Peter Gesner, the archaeologist leading the project, has written an informative introduction to Hamilton's book.

The Pandora will continue to be excavated for several years yet (the project has its own Web site). Among items already recovered is medical equipment that belonged to Hamilton. His watch, too, has been recovered - stopped at twelve minutes past eleven. Beyond the spare details of his naval career we know very little about George Hamilton, surgeon, RN. His writing suggests a well-educated and broad-minded man of droll wit. His portrait, presumably commissioned for his book, reinforces this debonair man-of-the-world impression.

With only five Australian libraries holding copies of the 1793 original, this extremely rare book has been unavailable to the public. A 1990 limited edition went some way towards supplying scholars, but it only now, with the release of this superb facsimile (the first), that Hamilton's work is more widely available.

This is not a cheap book, in any sense of the word. The cherry Scottish calf quarter binding, the marbled paper boards, the classic Caslon typeface (the "Q" tail has more swash than a buccaneer) and the linen texture of the paper are a bibliophile's delight. And that's only the standard edition. The fully bound deluxe edition, limited to 50 boxed and numbered copies, is one of the choicest items to appear on the fine book market this year.