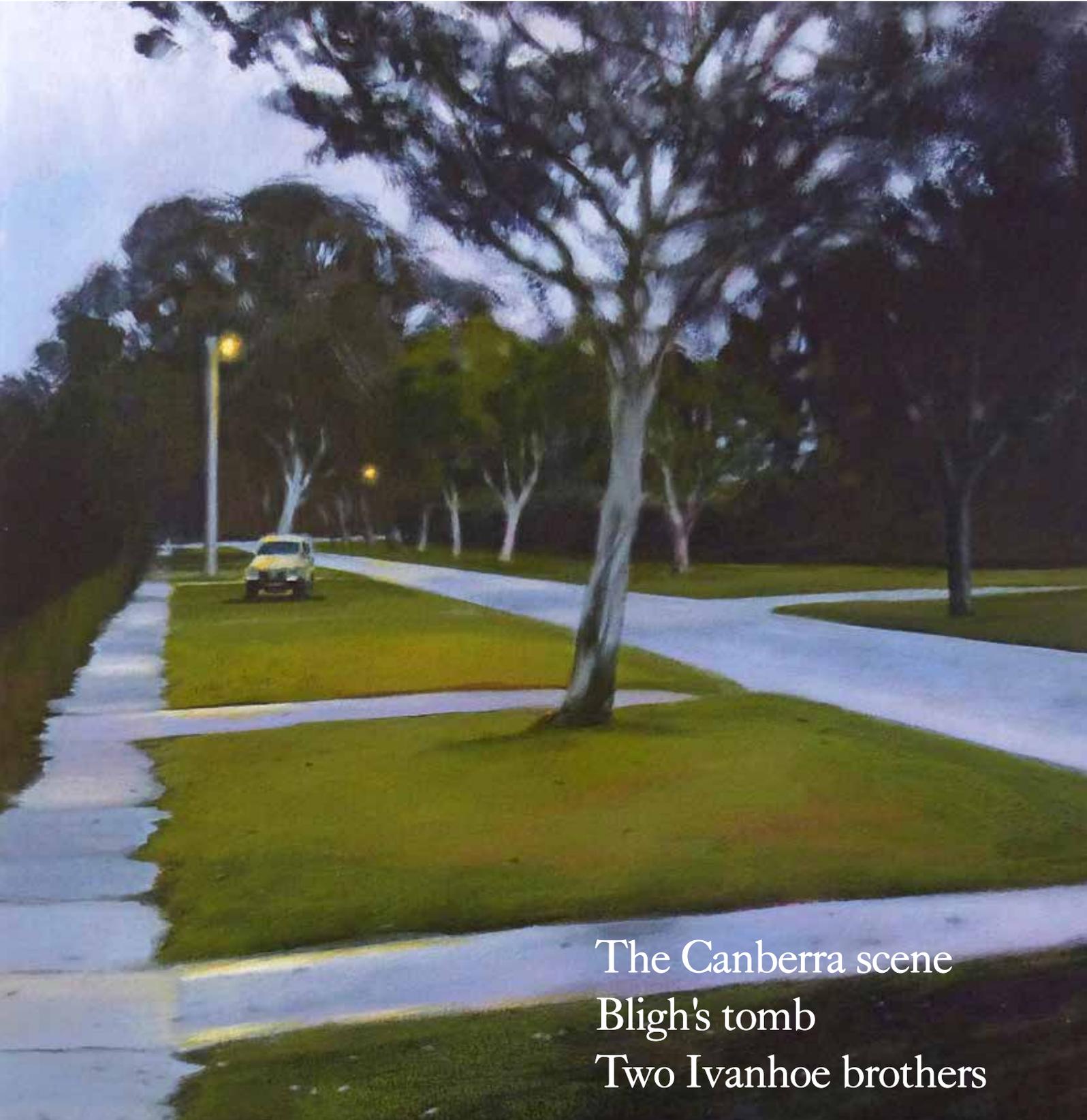


# Australian Garden

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## HISTORY



The Canberra scene  
Bligh's tomb  
Two Ivanhoe brothers



Christopher Woodward

## Captain Bligh's tomb

The Garden Museum churchyard, showing Bligh's tomb on the right.

©Sophie Mutevelia, courtesy of the Garden Museum

From the window of my office I can see the tombs of three plant-hunters: John Tradescant and his son, and Captain Bligh of the *Bounty*. My office is, in fact, the vestry of the old church of St Mary's at Lambeth in London, built beside the Thames in 1054, rebuilt by the Victorians, and in the 1970s rescued from demolition to become the world's first museum dedicated to garden history.

### The plant-hunters' tombs

The first tomb was built by the widow of the younger Tradescant, also John, who sailed three times to Virginia in search of plants; at his death in 1662 his father – who had sailed to Russia and Africa – was placed beside him in the vault. Carved into its lid is a poem which celebrates

the achievements of the two men as collectors, antiquarians and 'gardeners to the Rose and Lily Queen' – that is, Queen Henrietta Maria, the gardener wife of King Charles I. 'Transplanted here themselves' – note the anonymous poet's metaphor – at the Day of Judgement they shall 'change this garden for a paradise'. The carved letters are mossy – we like them mossy – and I can hear visitors pick out the words in accents from all over the world.

From time to time I hear an Australian voice call out 'There's Captain Bligh!' And – the voice continues – 'The celebrated navigator / who first transplanted the bread fruit tree / from Otaheite to the West Indies'.

Why Australian visitors? Bligh is not just the commander in the most famous mutiny in naval history – played on screen by Charles Laughton, Trevor Howard and Anthony Hopkins – but

was appointed Governor of New South Wales in 1805, where he was unseated and imprisoned in a rebellion by the officers of the New South Wales militia. That is, of course, a complex episode in Australia's political history: was Bligh a 'tyrant', as claimed by the wealthy settlers whose land claims he disputed? Or was he an opponent of corruption, and a champion of the newer settlers, as evidenced – it is said – by the gravestones which record how his name was given to the children of the poor?

What is certain is that he is one of very people whose epitaph names a plant.

## Bligh's *Bounty* voyage

The *Bounty* sailed to Tahiti to collect cuttings from the breadfruit trees, plants whose fruit was promoted as a 'miracle food' by Joseph Banks after his voyage to Tahiti with Captain Cook in 1769. The trees fruit prolifically and can be [stored] easily; sailors, enthused Banks, happily swapped biscuit for breadfruit.

When the War of Independence interrupted the supply of provisions from North America, up to 20,000 slaves in British plantations died of starvation. Plantation owners such as Duncan Campbell – uncle of Bligh's wife Betsy – quickened the search for a cheap crop. Campbell was also Superintendent of Convicts on the River Thames, and discussed with Banks the possibility of Australia as an alternative to the lost convict settlements in North America. As ever, the history of plants is inseparable from trade, empire, politics, and patronage.

Bligh had sailed on Cook's last – and fatal – voyage in 1777 and wrote that Tahiti was 'the Paradise of the world'. Paradise changes its meaning with each century. In the age of Christopher Columbus Eden was still a place marked on a map; on his third voyage he took a speaker of ancient Chaldean, whose words of greeting puzzled the [Indians] on the banks of the Orinoco. By Tradescant's time it was accepted that Eden had vanished, its plants scattered across the globe; they would be reunited in their garden of 'rarities' in Lambeth. Joseph Bank's vision of a garden at Kew which was a compendium of the flora of the King's empire was an Enlightenment extension of the same concept.

## In Tahiti

Tahiti appeared to be a more fantastic Paradise: of sunshine, sexual freedom, and social playfulness – and, as Banks added, the breadfruit liberated the inhabitants from 'the curse of our forefathers': that is, since Adam's fall the need to sweat

food from the tilled soil. In her 2011 biography *Bligh*, Professor Anne Salmond of the University of Auckland applies the perspective of an anthropologist to reveal Bligh as a perceptive early ethnographer, making a serious and open-minded study of the structures and beliefs of the island communities. It was Bligh who understood the significance of the role of taio, or friend, applied to Cook and himself within a culture of spiritual power, and that women would have sex with the sailors because the red feathers they offered were a transference of that power; the figurehead of the *Bounty* was repainted in bright colours to play a



Tahitian variety loio of breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*), conserved in the collection of the Breadfruit Institute, Hawaii.

Photo: ©Jim Wiseman, courtesy of the Breadfruit Institute

'Transplanting of the bread-fruit-trees from Otaheite', painted and engraved by Thomas Gosse, 1796.

National Library of Australia an6016209



part in fertility rituals. *Maita'i vahine no Peretane!* exclaimed the Tahitians: 'What a fine woman from Britain!'

Bligh's horticultural diligence in watching the breadfruit cuttings take root lengthened the stay to five months, during which time discipline loosened. A second factor in the mutiny, Salmond argues, was that Banks's instruction to remodel the captain's cabin as a greenhouse required Bligh to sleep with the men; he had no space in which to calm his thoughts, reflect, and to assert authority over the officers.

It's often said that the men mutinied in protest at the breadfruit getting all the water. That, however, was on the second voyage when the *Providence* and *Assistant* sailed from Tahiti with 1281 pots on deck, and under the scorching sky of the west Pacific men licked drops from the gardener's watering can. This time Bligh had a cabin, and Marines. This was the voyage of 'the floating garden' as Midshipman Tobin dubbed a ship with plantains and coconuts growing up the rigging.

### Adopting Bligh

The Garden Museum is hoping to find an adopter for Captain Bligh's tomb, which is Grade II\* listed (particularly important buildings of more than special interest) and of international importance, but was damaged by bombs during World War II. When the Garden Museum reopens early in 2017, the bicentenary year of Captain Bligh's death, his tomb and that of the Tradescants will be centre-stage in the new cloister garden designed by Dan Pearson. Adoption will support the urgently required conservation, interpretation and lighting of the tomb.

See [gardenmuseum.org.uk/page/garden-museum-development](http://gardenmuseum.org.uk/page/garden-museum-development) for details, or contact Kezia Evans:

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Artist's impression of the future garden and cloister, including the tombs of Bligh and the Tradescants.

Bligh's shipment of plants around the world was one of the great triumphs of transplantation in the age before the Wardian case. Despite that – and despite the heroic voyage of over three thousand miles in an open boat after the mutiny – Bligh was snubbed by the Admiralty on his return to London. He fought bravely beside Nelson – who praised him – at the bloody battle of Copenhagen, but in the end his life was defined by words, not blows. Bligh was a tongue-lasher, not a flogger, who throughout his career humiliated the officers in his command as 'scoundrels, damned rascals, hounds, hell-hounds, beasts, and infamous wretches', noted down Fletcher Christian's brother, a lawyer. By the time of his death, Christian – who exclaimed 'I am in hell!' on the morning of the mutiny – had become a Byronic hero of a popular poem. Bligh's inscription – a long one of the age – chiselled his side of the story into posterity.

The tomb is ornamented with Coade stone, a ceramic with the appearance of stone which was invented to a secret recipe at a factory in Lambeth, the parish in which the Bligh family lived (in a townhouse which is today a bed & breakfast, opposite the Imperial War Museum). The finial is not a breadfruit (how do you edit Wikipedia?) but an eternal flame, a standard component in the repertoire of neoclassical symbolism.

The extension for the Garden Museum will allow us to devote the interior of the church to six new galleries of garden history, displaying over a thousand artefacts and works of art which have not been on display before, together with the country's first archive of garden design. Designer Dan Pearson's concept is to create a cabinet of 'rarities', intriguing – as Tradescant did – with new and unusual species introduced by contemporary plant-collectors. We hope that Bligh would approve.

I'm grateful to the Australian visitors who made me curious about Captain Bligh. Personally, I'm ready for a new film about the *Bounty* – which would be the sixth since 1916. Russell Crowe was glimpsed visiting our neighbour the Archbishop of Canterbury for advice on how to play Noah; why not Captain Bligh? He is too tall for the role, but he might have the tongue.

**Christopher Woodward**, an art historian, is director of the Garden Museum and was formerly director of the Holburne Museum of Art, in Bath. He is the author of *In ruins*, and in support of the Museum's development appeal has swum the Hellespont, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Thames from Oxford to London.