

# **Pirate Utopias**

**Under the Banner of King Death**

Do or Die

Friday June 18th 1999

# Contents

The Rise of Piracy . . . . .	3
"a dunghill wheron England doth cast forth its rubbish" . . . . .	4
Arrgh, Jim Lad! . . . . .	6
Liberty, Equality, Fraternity . . . . .	7
Revenge . . . . .	9
Piracy and Slavery . . . . .	10
Going Native . . . . .	12
Sex and Drugs and Rock n' Roll . . . . .	13
Pirate Women . . . . .	14
Misson and Libertalia . . . . .	16
The Empire Strikes Back: The End of the Golden Age of Piracy . . . . .	17
The Black Flag . . . . .	19
Waging War on the Whalers . . . . .	20
Further Reading . . . . .	21
Notes . . . . .	21

**"In an honest Service, there is thin Commons, low Wages, and hard Labour; in this, Plenty and Satiety, Pleasure and Ease, Liberty and Power; and who would not ballance Creditor on this Side, when all the Hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sower Look or two at choaking. No, a merry Life and a short one shall be my Motto" - Pirate Captain Bartholomew Roberts.<sup>1</sup>**

During the 'Golden Age' of piracy in the 17th and 18th centuries, crews of early proletarian rebels, dropouts from civilization, plundered the lucrative shipping lanes between Europe and America. They operated from land enclaves, free ports; 'pirate utopias' located on islands and coastlines as yet beyond the reach of civilization. From these mini-anarchies - 'temporary autonomous zones' - they launched raiding parties so successful that they created an imperial crisis, attacking British trade with the colonies, and crippling the emerging system of global exploitation, slavery and colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

We can easily imagine the attraction of life as a sea-rover, answerable to no-one. Euro-American society of the 17th and 18th centuries was one of emergent capitalism, war, slavery, land enclosures and clearances; starvation and poverty side-by-side with unimaginable wealth. The Church dominated all aspects of life and women had few options beyond marital slavery. You could be press-ganged into the navy and endure conditions far worse than those experienced on board a pirate ship: "Conditions for ordinary seamen were both harsh and dangerous - and the pay was poor. Punishments available to the ship's officers included manacling, flogging and keel-hauling - the victim being pulled by means of a rope under the hull of the ship from one side to the other. Keel-hauling was a punishment which often proved fatal."<sup>3</sup> As Dr. Johnson famously observed: "no man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned... A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company."<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to this, pirates created a world of their own making, where they had "the choice in themselves" - a world of solidarity and fraternity, where they shared the risks and the gains of life at sea, made decisions collectively and seized their life for themselves in the present, denying its use to the merchants as a tool for the accumulation of dead property. Indeed, Lord Vaughan, Governor of Jamaica, wrote: "These Indyes are so Vast and Rich, And this kind of rapine so sweet, that it is one of the hardest things in the World to draw those from it which have used it for so long."<sup>5</sup>

## The Rise of Piracy

The era of Euro-American piracy is ushered in by the discovery of the New World and the enormous empire seized by the Spanish in the Americas. New technologies allowed long sea voyages to be made with regularity and accuracy, and the new empires that emerged were not based so

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Defoe (Captain Charles Johnson) - A General History of the Pyrates, Edited by Manuel Schonhorn, (London, Dent, 1972), p. 244

<sup>2</sup> For example, the East India Company was brought near to collapse by piracy in 1690s. Robert C. Ritchie - Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates, pp. 128-34

<sup>3</sup> Larry Law - Misson and Libertatia, (London, A Distribution/Dark Star Press, 1991), p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Marcus B. Rediker - Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700-1750, p. 258

<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit. 4, p. 255; Op. Cit. 2, p. 29, 142

much on control of the land as control of the seas. The Spanish were the world superpower of the 16th century, but did not go unchallenged for long; the French, Dutch and English all struggled to overtake the Spanish in the scramble for empire. In their quest to do so they were not above using piracy to attack the hated Spanish and fill their coffers with the vast wealth the Spanish had plundered from the Native Americans. In wartime this raiding would be legitimised as legal privateering but the rest of the time it was simply piracy with state-sponsorship (or at least toleration and encouragement). Over the course of the 17th century these embryonic empires finally overtook the Spanish and established themselves. With the new technologies shipping was no longer just used for luxury goods but became the basis of an international trading network essential to the origin and growth of capitalism. The massive expansion of sea-borne trade in this period necessarily also created a large population of seafarers - a new class of wage-workers that had not previously existed. For many of them piracy seemed an attractive alternative to the harsh realities of the merchant service or the navy.

But as the new empires - especially the British Empire - matured, attitudes to piracy changed: "The roistering buccaneer did not suit the hard-headed merchants and imperial bureaucrats, whose musty world of balance sheets and reports came into violent conflict with that of the pirates." The ruling class recognised that stable, orderly, regular trade served the interests of a mature imperial power far better than piracy. So piracy was forced to evolve in the late 17th and early 18th century. Pirates were no longer state-sponsored gentleman-adventurers like Sir Francis Drake but dropout wage slaves, mutineers, a multi-ethnic melting pot of rebellious proles. Where there had once been a blurring of the edges between legitimate commercial activity and piracy, now pirates found they had few of their old friends left and were increasingly regarded as "Brutes, and Beasts of Prey." As mainstream society rejected the pirates, they likewise became increasingly antagonistic in their rejection of it. From this point onwards the only pirates were those who explicitly rejected the state and its laws and declared themselves in open war against it. Pirates were driven further away from the centres of power as the American colonies, originally beyond state control and relatively autonomous, were brought into the mainstream of imperial trade and governance. There developed a deadly spiral of increasing violence as state attacks were met with revenge from the pirates leading to greater state terror.<sup>6</sup>

## **"a dunghill wheron England doth cast forth its rubbish"**

The Caribbean islands in the second half of the 17th century were a melting pot of rebellious and pauperised immigrants from across the world. There were thousands of deported Irish, Liverpool beggars, Royalist prisoners from Scotland, pirates caught on the English high seas, highwaymen caught on the Scottish borders, exiled Huguenots and Frenchmen, outlawed religious dissenters and the captured prisoners of various uprisings and plots against the King.

The proto-anarchist revolutionary movements of the Civil War of the 1640s had been suppressed and defeated by the time of the dawn of the great age of piracy in the late 17th century but there is good evidence to show that some of the Diggers, Ranters, Muggletonians, Fifth Monarchy Men etc. fled to the Americas and the Caribbean where they inspired or joined these insurrectionary pirate crews. Indeed, a group of pirates settled in Madagascar at a place they had

---

<sup>6</sup> Op. Cit. 4, p. 272 n52, 274 - "as more pirates were captured and hanged, the greater cruelty was practiced by those who were still alive"; Op. Cit. 2, p. 2

"given the name of Ranter Bay."<sup>7</sup> After the defeat of the Levellers in 1649, John Lilburne offered to lead his followers to the West Indies, if the government would foot the bill. It also seems that the Ranters and Diggers lasted longer in the Americas than in Britain - as late as the 1690s there were reported to be Ranters in Long Island. This isn't surprising really as the New World territories were used by Britain as penal colonies for its discontented and rebellious poor. In 1655 Barbados was described as "a dunghill wheron England doth cast forth its rubbish." Among these undesirables there would have been numbers of radicals - those who had provided the spark for the revolution of 1640. "Perrot, the bearded ranter who refused to doff his hat to the Almighty, ended up in Barbadoes," as did many others such as the Ranter intellectual Joseph Salmon. That the Caribbean had become a haven for radicals did not go unnoticed: in 1656 Samuel Highland advised Parliament not to sentence the Quaker heretic James Nayler to transportation lest he infect other settlers. It was clear at this time that the new British colonies to the west were seen as a haven of relative religious and political liberty; that much further beyond the grasp of law and authority.<sup>8</sup>

Before European merchants discovered the African slave trade and the commercial possibilities of shipping Africans to the Caribbean, thousands of poor and working class Europeans were shipped to the new colonies as indentured servants - effectively a slave trade of its own. The only difference between the trade in indentured servants and the African slave trade was that in theory the slavery of these immigrants was not considered eternal and hereditary. However, many were tricked and their contracts extended indefinitely so they never won their freedom. Slaves, a lifetime investment, were often treated better than the indentured servants.<sup>9</sup>

However, the masters had great difficulty holding on to their servants who tended to go native and abscond to the freedom of the myriad islands of the Antilles, or to isolated bits of coastline or jungle. Here they often formed little self-governing bands or tribes of dropouts and runaways, in many ways mimicking the native peoples before them. These men - sailors and soldiers, slaves and indentured servants, formed the basis for the Caribbean piracy that emerged in the 17th century - maintaining their egalitarian tribal structure even when at sea. As their numbers grew and more men flocked to the red flag, their attacks on the Spanish became more audacious. After a raid they would make for a city like Port Royale in Jamaica, to spend all their money in one great binge of whoring, gambling and drinking before returning to their hunter-gatherer existence on out of the way islands.<sup>10</sup>

There were also of course up to 80,000 black slaves working on the plantations who were prone to frequent and bloody revolts, as well as the last few remaining indigenous Indian inhabitants of the islands. In 1649 a slave rebellion on Barbados coincided with a white servants' uprising. In 1655, following a common pattern, the Irish joined with the blacks in revolt. There were similar rebellions in Bermuda, St. Christopher and Montserrat, whilst in Jamaica transported Monmouthite rebels united with 'maroon' Indians in revolt. This hodge-podge of the dispossessed

<sup>7</sup> Marcus B. Rediker - 'Libertalia: The Pirate's Utopia' in David Cordingly (ed.) - *Pirates*, p. 126

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hill - 'Radical Pirates?' in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 3, pp. 162, 166-9; Peter Lamborn Wilson - 'Caliban's Masque: Spiritual Anarchy and the Wild Man in Colonial America', in Sakolsky and Koehnline (eds.) - *Gone to Croatan: The Origins of North American Dropout Culture* (New York/Edinburgh, Autonomedia/AK Press, 1993), p. 107; *Op. Cit.* 2, pp. 14-15

<sup>9</sup> Jenifer G. Marx - 'Brethren of the Coast' in Cordingly (ed.) - *Pirates*, pp. 47, 49-50; *Op. Cit.* 4, pp. 69, 81- 2; *Op. Cit.* 2, pp. 65, 211, 226

<sup>10</sup> Richard Platt and Tina Chambers (Photographer) - *Pirate* (Eyewitness Books) (London, Dorling Kindersley, 1995), pp. 20, 26-7; *Op. Cit.* 2, pp. 22-23

were described in 1665 as "convict gaol birds or riotous persons, rotten before they are sent forth, and at best idle and only fit for the mines." To which a lady colonist of Antigua added "they be all a company of sodomists." This was the seething multi-racial hotbed of anger and class tension into which our transported or voluntarily exiled Ranters, Diggers and Levellers would have arrived and out of which the great age of Euro-American piracy took shape with the emergence of the buccaneers in the Caribbean around the middle of the 17th century.<sup>11</sup>

## Arrgh, Jim Lad!

The overwhelming majority of pirates were merchant seamen who elected to join the pirates when their ships were captured, although a small number were mutineers who had collectively seized their ship. "According to Patrick Pringle's Jolly Roger, pirate recruitment was most successful among the unemployed, escaped bondsmen, and transported criminals. The high seas made for an instantaneous levelling of class inequalities."

Many pirates displayed a fine sense of class consciousness; for example, a pirate named Captain Bellamy made this speech to the captain of a merchant vessel he had just taken as a prize. The captain of the merchant vessel had just declined an invitation to join the pirate crew:

"I am sorry they won't let you have your Sloop again, for I scorn to do any one a Mischief, when it is not for my Advantage; damn the Sloop, we must sink her, and she might be of Use to you. Tho', damn ye, you are a sneaking Puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by Laws which rich Men have made for their own Security, for the cowardly Whelps have not the Courage otherwise to defend what they get by their Knavery; but damn ye altogether: Damn them for a Pack of crafty Rascals, and you, who serve them, for a Parcel of hen-hearted Numskuls. They villify us, the Scoundrels do, when there is only this Difference, they rob the Poor under the Cover of Law, forsooth, and we plunder the Rich under the Protection of our own Courage; had you not better make One of us, than sneak after the Arses of those Villains for Employment?"

When the captain replied that his conscience would not let him break the laws of God and man, the pirate Bellamy continued:

"You are a devilish Conscience Rascal, damn ye, I am a free Prince, and I have as much Authority to make War on the whole World, as he who has a hundred Sail of Ships at Sea, and an Army of 100,000 Men in the Field; and this my Conscience tells me; but there is no arguing with such sniveling Puppies, who allow Superiors to kick them about Deck at Pleasure."<sup>12</sup>

Piracy was one strategy in an early cycle of Atlantic class struggle. Seamen also used mutiny and desertion and other tactics in order to survive and to resist their lot. Pirates were perhaps the most international and militant section of the proto-proletariat constituted by 17th and 18th

---

<sup>11</sup> Hill - 'Radical Pirates?', pp. 169-170

<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit. 4, p. 258; Hakim Bey - T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism (New York, Autonomedia, 1991) pp. 23, 139; Op. Cit. 1, p. 587

century sailors. There were, for example, some hardcore trouble-makers like Edward Buckmaster, a sailor who joined Kidd's crew in 1696, who had been arrested and jailed a number of times for agitation and rioting, or Robert Culliford, who repeatedly led mutinies, seizing the ship he was serving on and turning pirate.<sup>13</sup>

During wartime, due to the demands of the navy, there was a great shortage of skilled maritime labour and seamen could command relatively high wages. The end of war, especially Queen Anne's War, which ended in 1713, cast vast numbers of naval seamen into unemployment and caused a huge slump in wages. 40,000 men found themselves without work at the end of the war - roaming the streets of ports like Bristol, Portsmouth and New York. In wartime privateering provided the opportunity for a relative degree of freedom and a chance at wealth. The end of war meant the end of privateering too, and these unemployed ex-privateers only added to the huge labour surplus. Queen Anne's War had lasted 11 years and in 1713 many sailors must have known little else but warfare and the plundering of ships. It was commonly observed that on the cessation of war privateers turned pirate. The combination of thousands of men trained and experienced in the capture and plundering of ships suddenly finding themselves unemployed and having to compete harder and harder for less and less wages was explosive - for many piracy must have been one of the few alternatives to starvation.<sup>14</sup>

## Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

Having escaped the tyranny of discipline aboard merchant vessels the most striking thing about the organisation of pirate crews was their anti-authoritarian nature. Each crew functioned under the terms of written articles, agreed by the whole crew and signed by each member. The articles of Bartholomew Roberts' crew begin:

"Every Man has a Vote in Affairs of Moment; has equal Title to the fresh Provisions, or strong Liquors, at any Time seized, and may use them at Pleasure, unless a Scarcity make it necessary, for the Good of all, to vote a Retrenchment."<sup>15</sup>

Euro-American pirate crews really formed one community, with a common set of customs shared across the various ships. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity thrived at sea over a hundred years before the French Revolution. The authorities were often shocked by their libertarian tendencies; the Dutch Governor of Mauritius met a pirate crew and commented: "Every man had as much say as the captain and each man carried his own weapons in his blanket." This was profoundly threatening to the order of European society, where firearms were restricted to the upper classes, and provided a stark contrast to merchant ships where anything that could be used as a weapon was kept under lock and key, and to the navy where the primary purpose of the marines stationed on naval vessels was to keep the sailors in their place.<sup>16</sup>

Pirate ships operated on a 'No Prey, No Pay' basis, but when a vessel was captured the booty was divided up by a share system. This sort of share system was common in mediaeval shipping, but had been phased out as shipping became a capitalist enterprise and sailors wage labourers.

---

<sup>13</sup> Op. Cit. 2, pp. 65, 117-8

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp. 42, 234

<sup>15</sup> Op. Cit. 1, p. 211

<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit. 2, p. 124

It still existed in privateering and whaling but pirates developed it into its most egalitarian form - there were no shares for owners or investors or merchants, there was no elaborate hierarchy of wage differentiation - everyone got an equal share of the booty and the captain usually only 1 or 1 1/2 share. The wreck of Sam Bellamy's pirate ship the *Whydah*, which was discovered in 1984, provides good evidence of this - among the artefacts recovered was rare West African gold Akan jewellery which "had been hacked apart with clear knife marks, which suggested that there had been an attempt to divide it equally."<sup>17</sup>

The harshness of life at sea made mutual aid into a simple survival tactic. The natural solidarity of fellow tars was carried over into pirate organisation. Pirates often went into 'consortship' with one another, where if one died the other got his property. Pirate articles also commonly included a form of mutual aid where injured shipmates unable to participate in the fighting would receive their share as a pension. Pirates took this sort of solidarity very seriously - at least one pirate crew compensated their wounded only to discover they had nothing left. From the articles of Bartholomew Roberts' crew: "If... any Man should lose a Limb, or become a Cripple in their Service, he was to have 800 Dollars, out of the publick Stock, and for lesser Hurts, proportionably." And from those of George Lowther's crew: "He that shall have the Misfortune to lose a Limb, in Time of Engagement, shall have the Sum of one hundred and fifty Pounds Sterling, and remain with the Company as long as he shall think fit."<sup>18</sup>

Pirate captains were elected and could be de-elected at any time for abuse of their authority. The captain enjoyed no special privileges: He "or any other Officer is allowed no more [food] than another man, nay, the Captain cannot keep his Cabbin to himself." Captains were deposed for cowardice, cruelty and revealingly, for refusing "to take and plunder English Vessels" - the pirates had turned their backs on the state and its laws and no lingering feelings of patriotism were to be allowed. The captain only had right of command in the heat of battle, otherwise all decisions were made by the whole ship's company. This radical democracy was not necessarily very efficient; often pirate ships tended to wander rather aimlessly as the crew changed its mind.<sup>19</sup>

The crew of Thomas Anstis ridicule the law by holding a mock trial. The judge, using an old tarpaulin as a robe and a mop-end as a wig, sits in a mangrove tree and declares: "I'll have you know, Raskal, we don't sit here to hear Reason - we go according to Law."

The original buccaneers had called themselves the 'brethren of the coast' - an apt term as pirates swapped ships, met up at rendez-vous points, joined together with other crews for combined raids and met up with old ship mates. Although it might seem surprising that over the whole expanse of the world's oceans the pirates kept in touch and met up with each other, they continually returned to the various 'free ports' where they were welcomed by black market traders who would buy their goods. Pirate crews recognised each other, didn't attack each other and often worked together in large fleets. For example in 1695 the crews of Captains Avery, Faro, Want, Maze, Tew and Wake all met up for a combined raid on the annual Muslim pilgrim fleet to Mecca, the six ships containing at least 500 men. They also met up and had parties together; like the "saturnalia" when the crews of Blackbeard and Charles Vane joined forces on North Carolina's Ocracoke Island in 1718 (see picture on page 71). There is even evidence that there was a unique pirate language, which is a real sign the pirates were evolving their own distinct cul-

---

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Osborne - 'A Pirate's Progress: How the Maritime Rogue Became a Multicultural Hero' *Lingua Franca* March 1998 <http://www.linguafranca.com/9803/osborne.html> (unpaginated) [ They've stopped publishing 22/7/02 ]

<sup>18</sup> Op. Cit. 2, p. 59, 258 n38; Op. Cit. 4, p. 264; Op. Cit. 1, pp. 212, 308, 343

<sup>19</sup> Op. Cit. 4, p. 262



ture. Philip Ashton, who spent sixteen months among pirates in 1722-3, reported that one of his captors "according to the Pirates usual Custom, and in their proper Dialect, asked me, If I would sign their Articles". There is also a hilarious account of how a pirate captive "sav'd his life [by] meer Dint of Cursing and Damning" - suggesting that one feature of this pirate language was the liberal use of blasphemy and swearing. Through splitting and coalescing and men jumping from ship to ship a great continuity existed amongst the various pirate crews, sharing the same cultures and customs and over the course of time developing a specifically 'pirate consciousness.' The prospect that this pirate community might take a more permanent form was a threat to the authorities who feared that they might set up "a Commonwealth" in uninhabited regions, where "no Power in those Parts of the World could have been able to dispute it with them."<sup>20</sup>

The crew of Thomas Anstis ridicule the law by holding a mock trial. The judge, using an old tarpaulin as a robe and a mop-end as a wig, sits in a mangrove tree and declares: "I'll have you know, Raskal, we don't sit here to hear Reason - we go according to Law."

## Revenge

One particularly important part of what we might call the 'pirate consciousness' was revenge upon the captains and masters who had previously exploited them. The pirate Howell Davis stated: "their reasons for going a pirating were to revenge themselves on base Merchants and cruel commanders of Ships." On capturing a merchantman pirates would commonly administer the 'Distribution of Justice', "enquiring into the Manner of the Commander's Behaviour to their Men, and those, against whom Complaint was made" were "whipp'd and pickled." Interestingly, one of the favourite torments inflicted upon captured captains was the 'Sweat' - a word meaning to drive hard or to overwork - in which the offender was made to run round and round the mizzenmast between decks to the tune of a merry jig while he was encouraged to go faster by the surrounding pirates jabbing his backside with "Points of Swords, Penknives, Compasses, Forks &c." It seems the pirates were determined to give the master a taste of his own medicine - creating a literally vicious circle or treadmill reminiscent of the seaman's labouring life. The most militant of these sea-borne righters-of-wrong has to be Philip Lyne, who when apprehended in 1726 confessed he "had killed 37 Masters of Vessels."<sup>21</sup>

'The Pirates Striking off the arm of Captain Babcock': Babcock's ship was intercepted en route from Bombay, some of the crew joined the pirates and turned against their own captain - apparently cutting his arm off.

Radical historian Marcus Rediker has uncovered interesting evidence of pirates' concern with retribution in the names of their ships - the largest single group of names are the ones involving revenge, for example Blackbeard's ship the *Queen Anne's Revenge* or John Cole's wonderfully named *New York Revenge's Revenge*. Merchant Captain Thomas Checkley got it just right when he described the pirates who captured his ship as pretending "to be Robbin Hoods Men." There is further evidence for this in the name of another ship - the *Little John* belonging to pirate John Ward. Peter Lamborn Wilson says: "[this] offers us a precious insight into his ideas and his image

---

<sup>20</sup> Op. Cit. 2, pp. 87-88, 117; Douglas Botting and the Editors of Time-Life Books - *The Pirates* (Time Life's *The Seafarers Series*) (Amsterdam, Time-Life, 1979), p. 142; Op. Cit. 4, p. 278; Op. Cit. 1, p. 7

<sup>21</sup> Cordingly - *Life Among the Pirates*, p. 271; Op. Cit. 2, p. 234; Botting - *The Pirates*, p. 61; Op. Cit. 4, pp. 269-272

of himself: clearly he considered himself a kind of Robin Hood of the seas. We have some evidence he gave to the poor, and he was clearly determined to steal from the rich.”<sup>22</sup>

The response of the state to these merry men of the seven seas was brutal - the crime of piracy carried the death sentence. The early years of the 18th century saw “royal officials and pirates [locked] into a system of reciprocal terror” as pirates became more antagonistic to mainstream society and the authorities ever more determined to hunt them down. Rumours that pirates who had taken advantage of the 1698 royal pardon were on surrendering denied the benefits of the pardon only increased mistrust and antagonism; the pirates resolved “no longer to attend to any offers of forgiveness but in case of attack, to defend themselves on their faithless countrymen who may fall into their hands.” In 1722 Captain Luke Knott was granted £230 for the loss of his career, after turning over 8 pirates, “his being obliged to quit the Merchant service, the Pirates threatening to Torture him to death if ever he should fall into their hands.” It was by no means an empty threat - in 1720 pirates of the crew of Bartholomew Roberts “openly and in the daytime burnt and destroyed... vessels in the Road of Basseterre [St. Kitts] and had the audaciousness to insult H.M. Fort,” avenging the execution of “their comrades at Nevis”. Roberts then sent word to the governor that “they would Come and Burn the Town [Sandy Point] about his Ears for hanging the Pyrates there.” Roberts even had his own pirate flag made showing him standing on two skulls labelled ABH and AMH - ‘A Barbadian’s Head’ and ‘A Martinican’s Head’ - later that same year he gave substance to his vendetta against the two islands by hanging the governor of Martinique from a yardarm. As bounties were offered for the capture of pirates, the pirates responded by offering rewards for certain officials. And when pirates were captured or executed, other pirate crews often revenged their brethren, attacking the town that condemned them, or the shipping of that port. This sort of solidarity shows that there had developed a real pirate community, and that those sailing under ‘the banner of King Death’ no longer thought of themselves as English or Dutch or French but as pirates.<sup>23</sup>

## Piracy and Slavery

The Golden Age of piracy was also the hey-day of the Atlantic slave trade. The relationship between piracy and the slave trade is complex and ambiguous. Some pirates participated in the slave trade and shared their contemporaries’ attitude to Africans as commodities for exchange.

A group of pirates, among them Gibbs and Wansley, burying their treasure on Barron Island. This engraving is unusual for the rare depiction of an African-American pirate, although in fact there were many of them.

However, not all pirates participated in the slave trade. Indeed large numbers of pirates were ex-slaves; there was a much higher proportion of blacks on pirate ships than on merchant or naval vessels, and only rarely did the observers who noted their presence refer to them as ‘slaves’. Most of these black pirates would have been runaway slaves, either joining with the pirates on the course of the voyage from Africa, deserting from the plantation, or sent as slaves to work on board ship. Some may have been free men, like the “free Negro” seaman from Deptford who in 1721 led “a Mutiney that we had too many Officers, and that the work was too hard, and what not.” Seafaring in general offered more autonomy to blacks than life on the plantation, but piracy in

---

<sup>22</sup> Op. Cit. 4, p. 269; Peter Lamborn Wilson - *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegadoes*, p. 57

<sup>23</sup> Op. Cit. 4, pp. 255, 274, 277; Op. Cit. 2, p. 234; Botting - *The Pirates*, pp. 48, 166; Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, p. 35

particular, could - although it was a risk - offer one of the few chances at freedom for an African in the 18th century Atlantic. For example, a quarter of the two-hundred strong crew of Captain Bellamy's ship the *Whydah* were black, and eyewitness accounts of the sinking of the pirate vessel off Wellfleet, Massachusetts in 1717 report that many of the corpses washed up were black. Pirate historian Kenneth Kinkor argues that although the *Whydah* was originally a slave ship, the blacks on board at the time of the sinking were members of the crew, not slaves. Partially because pirates, along with other tars, "entertain'd so contemptible a Notion of Landsmen," a black man who knew the ropes was more likely to win respect than a landsman who didn't. Kinkor notes: "Pirates judged Africans more on the basis of their language and sailing skills - in other words, on their level of cultural attainment - than on their race."<sup>24</sup>

Black pirates would often lead the boarding party to capture a prize. The pirate ship the *Morning Star* had "a Negro Cook doubly arm'd" in the boarding party and more than half of Edward Condent's boarding party on the *Dragon* were black. Some black pirates became quartermasters or captains. For example, in 1699, when Captain Kidd dropped anchor in New York, two sloops were there to meet him, one of whose "Mate was a little black man... who, as it was said, had been formerly Captain Kidd's Quarter Master."<sup>25</sup>

In the 17th century blacks found on pirate ships were not tried with the other pirates because it was assumed they were slaves, but by the 18th century they were being executed alongside their white 'brethren'. Still the most likely fate for a black pirate, if he was captured, was to be sold into slavery, whether he was a freeman or not. When Blackbeard was captured by the Royal Navy in 1718, five of his eighteen man crew were black and according to the Governor's Council of Virginia the five blacks were "equally concerned with the rest of the Crew in the same Acts of Piracy." A "resolute Fellow, a Negroe" named Caesar was caught just as he was about to blow up the whole ship rather than be captured and most likely returned to slavery.<sup>26</sup>

In 1715 the ruling Council of the Colony of Virginia worried about the connections between the "Ravage of Pyrates" and "an Insurrection of the Negroes." They were right to be concerned. By 1716 the slaves of Antigua had grown "very impudent and insulting" and reportedly many of them "went off to join those pirates who did not seem too concerned about color differences." These connections were trans-Atlantic; stretching from the heart of Empire in London, to the slave colonies in the Americas and the 'Slave Coast' of Africa. In the early 1720s a gang of pirates settled in West Africa, joining and intermixing with the Kru - a West African people from what is now Sierra Leone and Liberia, renowned both for their seamanship in their long canoes and when enslaved for their leadership of slave revolts. The pirates were probably members of Bartholomew Roberts' crew who had fled into the woods when attacked by the Navy in 1722. This alliance is not so unusual when you consider that of the 157 men who didn't escape and were either captured or killed on board Roberts' ship, 45 of them were black - probably neither slaves nor pirates but "Black saylors, commonly known by the name of gremetoes" - independent African mariners primarily from the Sierra Leone region, who would have joined the pirates "for a small demand of wages."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Op. Cit. 7, pp. 133-4; W. Jeffrey Bolster - *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 12-13; Op. Cit. 1, p. 228; Op. Cit. 20 (unpaginated)

<sup>25</sup> Op. Cit. 7, p. 133; Bolster - *Black Jacks*, p. 15

<sup>26</sup> Op. Cit. 20 (unpaginated); Op. Cit. 7, pp. 133-4, 249 n37; Bolster - *Black Jacks*, p. 14; Op. Cit. 1, p. 82

<sup>27</sup> Op. Cit. 7, pp. 134, 249 n42, 250 n44; Bolster - *Black Jacks*, pp. 50-1

We can see the way these connections were spread and the how the pirates' legacy was disseminated even after their defeat in the fate of some of those captured on Roberts' pirate ship. "Negroes" from his crew grew mutinous over the poor conditions and "thin Commons" they received from the Navy. "Many of them" had "lived a long time" in the "pyraty Way", which obviously for them had meant better food and more freedom.<sup>28</sup>

## Going Native

Lionel Wafer was a French surgeon who joined the buccaneer crews in the Caribbean in 1677. While returning from a voyage to the East Indies he met with an accident and was forced to recuperate in an Indian village, eventually adopting Indian customs. This is his description of the return of some English sailors to the village:

"I sat awhile, cringing upon my hams among the Indians, after their fashion, painted as they were, and all naked but only about the waist, and with my nose-piece hanging over my mouth. 'Twas the better part of an hour before one of the crew, looking more narrowly upon me, cried out, "Here's our doctor," and immediately all congratulated my arrival among them."<sup>29</sup>

This sort of dropping out and going native was not always accidental. The buccaneers of the Caribbean originally got their name from boucan, a practice of smoking meat they had learnt from the native Arawak Indians. The buccaneers were originally land squatters on the large Spanish owned island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) - they turned to piracy following Spanish attempts to oust them. On Hispaniola they followed a way of life essentially identical to the native peoples who had preceded them. This sort of 'marooning life' was very clearly identified with piracy - apart from the buccaneers of Hispaniola and Tortuga the main other group of European dropouts in the New World were the logwood cutters of Bay of Campeche (now Honduras and Belize), a "rude drunken crew" who were considered by most observers to be interchangeable with pirates. They consciously chose a non-accumulative life living in independent communal settlements on the world's periphery.<sup>30</sup>

The pirates' relations with the native peoples they encountered were split. Some pirates would enslave peoples they encountered, make them work, rape the women and steal. But other pirates settled down and intermarried - becoming part of the society. Particularly in Madagascar, the pirates mixing with the native population had produced "a dark Mulatto Race there." Contacts and cultural exchange between pirates, seamen and Africans led to the clear similarities between sea shanties and African songs. In 1743 some seamen were court-martialled for singing a "negro song". These sort of connections went in both directions and were not as rare as you might imagine. A pirate called William May, stranded on the Madagascan island of Johanna got a shock when he was addressed in fluent English by one of the "negroes". He learned that the man had been taken from the island by an English ship and had lived for a while in Bethnal Green in

---

<sup>28</sup> Op. Cit. 7, p. 134; Op. Cit. 1, p. 273

<sup>29</sup> Lionel Wafer - Voyage de Mr. Wafer, Ou l'on trouve la description de l'Isthme de l'Amérique (Publisher not stated, Paris? 1723) <http://www.buccaneer.net/piratebooks.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Platt and Chambers - Pirate, pp. 26-7; Op. Cit. 4, p. 146; Cordingly - Life Among the Pirates, p. 7

London, before returning home. His new friend saved him from being captured by the English and taken to Bombay and hanged.<sup>31</sup>

It is a common feature of what you might call 'pirate ideology' that pirates thought of themselves as free kings, as autonomous individual emperors. This was partly to do with the dream of wealth - Henry Avery was idolised for the enormous wealth he plundered; some believed he had set up his own pirate kingdom. Yet there was a pirate who achieved an even more remarkable rags-to-riches story, for he started out as a slave in the French colony of Martinique: Abraham Samuel, "Tolinor Rex", the King of Fort Dauphin. Samuel was a runaway slave who joined the crew of the pirate ship John and Rebecca, eventually becoming quartermaster. In 1696 the pirates captured a large and valuable prize and decided to retire and settle down in Madagascar. Samuel ended up in the abandoned French colony of Fort Dauphin where he was identified by a local princess as the child she had borne to a Frenchman during the occupancy of the colony. Samuel suddenly found himself declared heir to the vacant throne of the kingdom. Slavers and merchants flocked to do business with "King Samuel" but he retained sympathies for his pirate comrades, allowing and assisting them to loot the merchants who came to trade with him. There were a number of similar, if less flamboyant, characters in the ports and harbours of Madagascar - pirates or slavers who had become local leaders with private armies of as many as 500 men.<sup>32</sup>

## Sex and Drugs and Rock n' Roll

The pirates certainly seem to have had more fun than their poor suffering counterparts on naval or merchant vessels. They sure had some pretty wild parties - in 1669 just off the coast of Hispaniola, some of Henry Morgan's buccaneers blew up their own ship during a particularly riotous party, which like all good pirate celebrations included much drunken firing of the ship's guns. Somehow they set light to the gunpowder in the ship's magazine and the resulting explosion totally destroyed the ship. On some voyages alcohol ran "as freely as ditchwater" and for many tars the promise of unrestricted grog rations had been one of the main reasons behind leaving the merchant service to become a pirate in the first place. However this sometimes backfired - one group of pirates took three days to capture a ship because there were never enough sober men available. Sailors in general loathed a "drink-water" voyage - one reason being that in the tropics the water tended to get things living in it and you had to strain it through your teeth.<sup>33</sup>

No pirate celebration would be complete without music. Pirates were renowned for their love of music and often hired musicians for the duration of a cruise. During the trial of "Black Bart" Bartholomew Roberts' crew in 1722, two men were acquitted as being only musicians. The pirates seem to have employed music in battle, as it was said of one of the men, James White, that his "business as music was upon the poop in time of action."<sup>34</sup>

For some men the freedom that piracy offered from the constrained world they had left behind extended to sexuality. European society of the 17th and 18th centuries was savagely anti-homosexual. The Royal Navy periodically conducted brutal anti-buggery campaigns on ships on which men might be confined together for years. In both the navy and the merchant service it

---

<sup>31</sup> Op. Cit. 1, p. 131; Op. Cit. 2, pp. 86-7, 104, 118

<sup>32</sup> Op. Cit. 2, pp. 84-5

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pp. 59, 69, 72-3; Cordingly - Life Among the Pirates, p. 64

<sup>34</sup> Cordingly - Life Among the Pirates, p. 115

was considered that sexuality was inimical to work and good order on board ship, as Minister John Flavel wrote of seamen to merchant John Lovering: "The Death of their Lusts, is the most Probable Means to give Life to your Trade." B.R. Burg in *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition* suggests that the vast majority of pirates were homosexual, and although there isn't really enough evidence to support this, nevertheless to indulge in these things a pirate colony was probably just about the safest place you could be. Some of the early buccaneers of Hispaniola and Tortuga lived in a kind of homosexual union known as *matelotage* (from the French for 'sailor' and possibly the origin of the word 'mate' meaning companion), holding their possessions in common, with the survivor inheriting. Even after women joined the buccaneers, *matelotage* continued with a partner sharing his wife with his *matelot*. Louis Le Golif in his *Memoirs of a Buccaneer* complained about homosexuality on Tortuga, where he had to fight two duels to keep ardent suitors at bay. Eventually the French Governor of Tortuga imported hundreds of prostitutes, hoping thereby to wean the buccaneers away from this practice. The pirate captain Robert Culliford, had a "great consort," John Swann, who lived with him. Some men bought "pretty boys" as companions. On one pirate ship a young man who admitted a homosexual relationship was put in irons and maltreated, but this seems to have been the exception rather than the rule. It is also significant that in no pirate articles are there any rules against homosexuality.<sup>35</sup>

## Pirate Women

The freedom of life under the Jolly Roger extended to another perhaps surprising group of sea-robbers: women pirates. Women weren't quite as rare at sea in the 17th and 18th centuries as you might imagine them to have been. There was a fairly well established tradition of women cross-dressing in order to seek their fortune, or to follow husbands or lovers to sea. Of course the only women we know about are the ones that got caught and exposed. Their more successful sisters have sailed off into anonymity. Even so, it would seem that women aboard pirate ships were few. Ironically this may have contributed to the pirates' downfall - they were relatively easy for the state to crush because the pirate community was widely dispersed and inherently fragile; they found it hard to reproduce or replenish their numbers. By comparison, the much longer lived and more successful pirates of the South China Seas were organised in family groups with men, women and children all at sea together - thus there was always a new generation of pirates to hand.<sup>36</sup>

Just as pirates in general defined themselves in opposition to the emerging capitalist social relations of the 17th and 18th centuries, so also some women found in piracy a way to rebel against the emerging gender roles. For example, Charlotte de Berry, born in England in 1636, followed her husband into the navy by dressing as a man. When she was forced aboard an Africa-bound vessel, she led a mutiny against the captain who had assaulted her, cutting off his head with a dagger. She then turned pirate and became captain, her ship cruising the African coast capturing gold ships. There were also other less successful women pirates; in Virginia in 1726,

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp. 122-5; Marcus B. Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger: The Lives of Anne Bonny and Mary Read, Pirates' in M. Creighton and L. Norling (eds.) - *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Atlantic Seafaring, 1700-1920* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 9; Op. Cit. 2, pp. 123-4; Marx - 'Brethren of the Coast', p. 39

<sup>36</sup> Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger', pp. 8-11, 233 n26; Op. Cit. 1, p. 212; Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, pp. 32-3, 62; Op. Cit. 4, p. 285; Ulrike Klausmann, Marion Meinzerin and Gabriel Kuhn (trans. Nicholas Levis) - *Women Pirates and the Politics of the Jolly Roger*, pp. 36-7

the authorities tried Mary Harley (or Harvey) and three men for piracy. The three men were sentenced to hang but Harley was released. Mary's husband Thomas was also involved in the piracy but seems to have escaped capture. Mary and her husband had been transported to the colonies as convicts a year earlier. Three years later in 1729, another deported female convict was on trial for piracy in the colony of Virginia. A gang of six pirates were sentenced to hang, including Mary Crickett (or Crichtett), who along with Edmund Williams, the leader of the pirate gang, had been transported to Virginia as a felon in 1728.<sup>37</sup>

However, the women pirates about whom we know the most are Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Mary Read was born as an illegitimate child, and brought up as a little boy by her mother in order to pass her off to her relatives as her legitimate son. She had to be tough to deal with the harsh circumstances of her life and by the time she was a teenager she was already "growing bold and strong." Mary seems to have liked her male identity and enlisted herself as a sailor on a man-of-war and then as an English soldier in the war in Flanders. At the end of the war she joined a Dutch ship bound for the West Indies. When her ship was captured by 'Calico' Jack Rackham's pirate crew, which included Anne Bonny, she decided to throw her lot in with the pirates. She seems to have taken to pirate life and began a new romance with one of the crew. When her lover got into an argument with a fellow pirate and was challenged to settle it in the pirate's customary way "at sword and pistol", Mary saved her lover by picking a fight with the contender, challenging him to a duel two hours before that he was due to fight with her lover and then running him through with her cutlass.<sup>38</sup>

Anne Bonny was born the illegitimate child of a "Maid-Servant" in Ireland and raised in male disguise, her father pretending she was the child of a relative entrusted to his care. He eventually took her to Charleston, South Carolina, where they no longer needed to keep up the pretence. Anne grew up into a "robust" woman of "fierce and courageous temper." Indeed, one time "when a young Fellow would have lain with her against her Will, she beat him so, that he lay ill of it a considerable time." She ran away to the Caribbean where she fell in love with the captain of a pirate crew called 'Calico' Jack Rackham (so-called because of his outlandish and colourful clothing). Anne and 'Calico' Jack, "finding they could not by fair means enjoy each other's Company with Freedom, resolved to run away together, and enjoy it in Spight of all the World." They stole a ship from the harbour and for the next couple of years Bonny was Rackham's shipmate and lover as their crew (which soon also included Mary Read disguised in male clothing, who joined them from a ship they captured) raided shipping in the Caribbean and American coastal waters.<sup>39</sup>

One of the witnesses at their trial, a woman called Dorothy Thomas, who had been taken prisoner by the pirates, said the women "wore Mens Jackets, and long Trousers, and Handkerchiefs tied about their Heads, and that each of them had a Machet[e] and Pistol in their Hands." Despite the fact Read and Bonny were in men's clothing, their prisoner was no fool; she said that "the Reason of her knowing and believing them to be Women was, by the largeness of their Breasts."

Other prisoners taken by the pirates reported that Bonny and Read "were both very profligate, cursing, and swearing much, and very ready and willing to do any Thing on board." Both women appear to have exercised some leadership; for example, they were part of the group designated to board prizes - which was a role reserved for only the most fearless and respected members

---

<sup>37</sup> Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, p. 33; Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger', pp. 10, 232-233 n24, n25

<sup>38</sup> Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger', pp. 3-5, 8, 13; Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, pp. 32-3

<sup>39</sup> Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger', pp. 5-7, 13-16, 234 n41; Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, pp. 32-3; Op. Cit. 1, pp. 623-6

of the crew. When the pirates "saw any vessel, gave Chase or Attack'd," the pair "wore Men's Cloaths," but at other times, "they wore Women's Cloaths."<sup>40</sup>

Rackham, Bonny and Read were all caught in 1720 by a British navy sloop off Jamaica. The crew were all totally drunk (a common event) and hid in the hold - there was only one other apart from Bonny and Read who was brave enough to fight. In disgust, Mary Read fired a pistol down into the hold "killing one and wounding others." Eighteen members of the crew had already been tried and sentenced to hang by the time the women came to court. Three of them, including Rackham, were later hung in chains at prime locations to act as a moral instruction and "Publick Example" to the seamen who would pass their rotting corpses. However, Mary Read insisted that "Men of Courage" - like herself - did not fear death. Courage was a primary virtue amongst the pirates - it was only courage that ensured their continued survival. 'Calico' Jack Rackham had been promoted from quartermaster to captain when the then current captain, Charles Vane, had been deposed by his crew for cowardice. So it was an ignominious end for Rackham to be told by Anne Bonny before he was due to be hanged that "if he had fought like a Man, he need not have been hang'd like a Dog." Both Bonny and Read escaped execution because they "pleaded their Bellies, being Quick with Child, and pray'd that Execution might be staid."<sup>41</sup>

## Misson and Libertalia

The most famous pirate utopia is that of Captain Misson and his pirate crew, who founded their intentional community, their lawless utopia of Libertalia in northern Mada-gascar in the Eighteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

Misson was French, born in Provence, and it was while in Rome on leave from the French warship *Victoire* that he lost his faith, disgusted by the decadence of the Papal Court. In Rome he ran into Caraccioli - a "lewd Priest" who over the course of long voyages with little to do but talk, gradually converted Misson and a sizeable portion of the rest of the crew to his brand of atheistic communism:

"...he fell upon Government, and shew'd, that every Man was born free, and had as much Right to what would support him, as to the Air he respired... that the vast

---

<sup>40</sup> Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger', pp. 7-8

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. pp. 2-3, 5-7, 13-14; Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, pp. 32, 35; *Op. Cit.* 1, pp. 158-9

<sup>42</sup> The whole of the following narrative is drawn from Captain Charles Johnson's *General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*, published in London in 1728, (*Op. Cit.* 1, pp. 383-439). Because Johnson's book is the only source for the history of Captain Misson, the story is almost universally asserted to be fictional. However the overall credibility of Johnson's book has been established - it would appear that this is the only fictional episode in an otherwise reliable work of history. The *General History* was published only a very few years after the events it recorded took place, and yet no one at the time denounced the Misson story as fiction. The story of Misson was believed. And it was believed because it was believable. There were radical, libertarian pirates, and there were pirate settlements on Madagascar - all the elements of the story fit with what we know of pirates. Perhaps the Misson story is a fiction with a solid basis in fact; perhaps like the story of Robin Hood it collects together a wide range of different experiences in one narrative. In either case the story of Libertalia represents the literary expression of the living traditions, practices and dreams of the Atlantic proletariat. On the Misson story and the reliability of the *General History* see: Maximillian E. Novak - 'Introduction' to Daniel Defoe (Captain Charles Johnson) - 'Of Captain Misson' (1728) extract from the *General History* - Augustan Reprint Society, Publication number 87 (W. A. Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 1961), pp. i-iii; *Op. Cit.* 3, pp. 6-8; *Op. Cit.* 7, pp. 125-7, 249 n2, n7; Manuel Schonhorn - 'Introduction' to *Op. Cit.* 1, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii; Rediker - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger',



Difference betwixt Man and Man, the one wallowing in Luxury, and the other in the most pinching Necessity, was owing only to Avarice and Ambition on the one Hand, and a pusilanimous Subjection on the other.”

Embarking on a career of piracy, the 200 strong crew of the *Victoire* called upon Misson to be their captain. They collectivised the wealth of the ship, deciding “all should be in common.” All decisions were to be put to “the Vote of the whole Company.” Thus they set out on their new “Life of Liberty.” Off the west coast of Africa they captured a Dutch slave ship. The slaves were freed and brought aboard the *Victoire*, Misson declaring that “the Trading for those of our own Species, cou’d never be agreeable to the Eyes of divine Justice: That no Man had Power of Liberty of another” and that “he had not exempted his Neck from the galling Yoak of Slavery, and asserted his own Liberty, to enslave others.” At every engagement they added to their numbers with new French, English and Dutch recruits and freed African slaves.

While cruising round the coast of Madagascar, Misson found a perfect bay in an area with fertile soil, fresh water and friendly natives. Here the pirates built *Libertalia*, renouncing their titles of English, French, Dutch or African and calling themselves *Liberi*. They created their own language, a polyglot mixture of African languages, combined with French, English, Dutch, Portuguese and native Madagascan. Shortly after the beginning of building work on the colony of *Libertalia*, the *Victoire* ran into the pirate Thomas Tew, who decided to accompany them back to *Libertalia*. Such a colony was no new idea to Tew; he had lost his quartermaster and 23 of his crew when they had left to form a settlement further up the Madagascan coast. The *Liberi* - “Enemies to Slavery,” aimed to boost their numbers by capturing another slave ship. Off the coast of Angola, Tew’s crew took an English slave ship with 240 men, women and children below decks. The African members of the pirate crew discovered many friends and relatives among the enslaved and struck off their fetters and handcuffs, regaling them with the glories of their new life of freedom.

The pirates settled down to become farmers, holding the land in common - “no Hedge bounded any particular Man’s Property.” Prizes and money taken at sea were “carry’d into the common Treasury, Money being of no Use where every Thing was in common.”

## **The Empire Strikes Back: The End of the Golden Age of Piracy**

The Golden Age of Euro-American piracy was roughly from 1650 to 1725 with its peak in about 1720. There were very specific conditions and circumstances that led to this hey-day on the high seas. The period opens with the emergence of the buccaneers on the Caribbean islands of Hispaniola and Tortuga. For most of this period piracy was centred around the Caribbean, and with good reason. The Caribbean islands provided innumerable hiding places, secret coves and uncharted islands; places where pirates could take on fresh water and provisions, rest up and lie in wait. The location was perfect; lying just on the route taken by the heavily laden treasure fleets from South America back to Spain and Portugal, the Caribbean was effectively impossible for any navy to police and many islands were unclaimed or uninhabited. All in all it added up to a freebooter’s paradise.

---

pp. 230-1 n4, n11; Botting - *The Pirates*, pp. 6, 21-22; Cordingly - *Life Among the Pirates*, pp. 10-11, 77

In 1700 a new law was introduced to allow for the swift trial and execution of pirates wherever they may be found. Previously they had to be transported back to London to stand trial and be executed at the low tide mark at Wapping. The 'Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy' also enforced the use of the death penalty and gave rewards for resisting pirate attack, but most importantly, it was not trial by jury but by a special court of naval officers. The famous Captain Kidd was one of the first victims of this new law - indeed the law was partially rushed through specifically so that it could be applied to him. He was hanged at Execution Dock in Wapping and his body was then placed in a gibbet, coated with tar to help preserve it, and hung at Tilbury Point to be a "terror to all that saw it." The blackened and rotting corpse was intended to serve as a very clear reminder to the common seaman of the risks of resisting the disciplines of wage labour.<sup>43</sup>

Kidd's case was unusual in that he was executed in London. After 1700, under the provisions of the new law the war against the pirates would increasingly take place around the peripheries of Empire, and it wouldn't just be one or two corpses that dangled from crosstrees down near the tidemark but sometimes twenty or thirty at a time. In one particularly significant case in 1722 the British Admiralty tried 169 pirates of Bartholomew Roberts' crew and executed 52 of them at Cape Coast Castle on the Guinea Coast. The 72 Africans on board, free or not, were sold into slavery, which perhaps some of them had escaped for a short while.<sup>44</sup>

It was the disappearance of the unique favourable conditions of the Golden Age that ended the reign of the pirates. With the development of capital in the 17th century came the rise of the state, fostered by the imperial wars that wracked the globe from 1688 onwards. The requirements of conducting these vast wars necessitated a huge increase in state power. When, in 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht ended war between the European nations, the state's ability to actually police piracy was massively increased. The end of the war also allowed naval ships to concentrate on hunting down the pirates and granted the British even larger commercial interests in the Caribbean, giving an extra incentive to these efforts. As the new, more powerful state consolidated its monopoly on violence, the colonies were brought into line. The practice of dealing with pirates and investing in pirate voyages had continued in the colonies long after it had become unacceptable at home; it was wiped out by an extension of state power from the mother country to enforce discipline on the colonies. The beginning of the end was marked by ex-buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan's return to Jamaica as Governor with express orders to destroy the pirates. Naval patrols flushed them from their lairs and mass hangings eliminated the leaders. Ultimately the pirates' war on trade had become too successful to be tolerated; the state was fighting to allow commerce to flow unimpeded and capital to accumulate, bringing wealth to the merchants and revenue to the state.<sup>45</sup>

If we want to look for the heirs of the libertarian piracy of the Golden Age we shouldn't necessarily only be looking at more recent pirates, but rather at how piracy fed into the Atlantic class struggle. Just as some of the initial impetus behind the piracy of the 17th and 18th centuries had come from land-based radical movements like the Levellers, the flow of ideas and practices circulated around the Atlantic world, emerging in sometimes surprising places. In 1748 there was a mutiny aboard the HMS Chesterfield, near Cape Coast Castle off the west coast of Africa.

---

<sup>43</sup> Op. Cit. 2, pp. 153-4, 228, 235; Cordingly - *Life Among the Pirates*, p. 237

<sup>44</sup> Op. Cit. 2, p. 235; Botting - *The Pirates*, pp. 174-5

<sup>45</sup> Op. Cit. 2, pp. 7, 128, 138, 147-51; Op. Cit. 20 (unpaginated)

One of the ringleaders - John Place - had been there before; he was one those captured with Bartholomew Roberts back in 1722. It was "old hands" like John Place who kept alive the pirate tradition and ensured the continuity of ideas and practices. The mutineers hoped pirate-fashion "to settle a colony". The term 'to strike' originated in mutiny, particularly the "Great Mutinies" at Spithead and the Nore in 1797 when sailors would strike their sails to disrupt the ceaseless flow of trade and the state's war machine. These English, Irish and African sailors established their own "council" and "shipboard democracy" and some even talked of settling a "New Colony" in America or Madagascar.<sup>46</sup>

The pirates prospered in a power vacuum, during a period of upheaval and war that allowed them the freedom to live effectively outside the law. With the coming of peace came an extension of control and an end to the possibility of pirate autonomy. This is not so surprising really when we consider that periods of war and turmoil have often allowed for revolutionary experiments, enclaves, communes and anarchies to flourish. From the pirates of the 17th and 18th centuries, to D'Annunzio's piratical Republic of Fiume in the First World War, the Paris Commune in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, The Diggers' land communes in the English Civil War and the Makhnovist peasants in the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution, it is often in interstice and interregnum that experiments in freedom can find space to flower.

"Is this Utopian? A map of the world which does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias." - Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*<sup>47</sup>

## The Black Flag

"Why is our flag black? Black is a shade of negation. The black flag is the negation of all flags. It is a negation of nationhood which puts the human race against itself and denies the unity of all humankind. Black is a mood of anger and outrage at all the hideous crimes against humanity perpetrated in the name of allegiance to one state or another."<sup>48</sup>

We all know that pirates flew the 'Jolly Roger' - the skull and cross-bones flag. The most likely derivation of the name 'Jolly Roger' is as an Anglicisation of the French *Jolie Rouge* - the red or 'bloody' flag that pirates originally used before the more well-known black. The red flag is widely known as the international symbol of proletarian revolution and revolt and the black flag has historically been the flag of the anarchist movement. (These two colours were most famously combined in the anarcho-communist red and black flags of the Spanish revolution of 1936.)<sup>49</sup>

The earliest definite report of the black flag being flown by anarchists or used in working class revolt is of the famous anarchist Louise Michel leading a crowd of rioting unemployed to ransack

---

<sup>46</sup> Op. Cit. 7, pp. 137-8

<sup>47</sup> *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow, Harper Collins, 1994), p. 1184

<sup>48</sup> Howard J. Ehrlich (ed.) - *Reinventing Anarchy, Again* (Edinburgh, AK Press, 1996), p. 31

<sup>49</sup> Cordingley - *Life Among the Pirates*, pp. 2, 138-143: "Red or 'bloody' flags are mentioned as often as black flags until the middle of the eighteenth century"; Op. Cit. 2, p. 22; Platt and Chambers - *Pirate*, p. 35

bakers' shops with a black flag on March 9th 1883. However there are reports that she had flown a skull and cross-bones flag 12 years earlier in 1871, while leading the women's battalions of the insurrectionary Paris Commune. The Paris Commune even had a daily paper called *Le Pirate*.<sup>50</sup>

In June 1780 when the prisons of London were broken open and the prisoners freed during the Gordon Riots we find this description: "A giant of a man had been seen riding a cart-horse and waving an immense black and red flag, like the standard bearer of an opposing army." This man's name was James Jackson and he led the masses to destroy London's main prison with a shout of "A-hoy for Newgate!" It would not be reading too much into it to suggest that this "a-hoy!" might indicate Jackson was a sailor - sailors had always been the most militant section of the working class, in which case this black and red flag signalling a call to freedom on the streets of London could easily have direct links to the black and red flags of the Caribbean several years earlier. This thus considerably pre-dates Louise Michel and almost puts us back in the hey-day of the pirates.<sup>51</sup>

The red and black flew again in the Caribbean in 1791. After a huge slave revolt, part of the old pirate stronghold of Hispaniola took instead the Native American name "Haiti" and became the world's first independent black republic. Led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, the rebels defeated the forces of three empires to win their liberty. The red and black flag of Haiti became a banner of freedom to eighteenth and nineteenth century blacks, especially to sailors who would sail to Haiti, become Haitians and then return home flying a red and black flag. American slaves aboard naval and merchant vessels would flee and seek refuge in Haiti.<sup>52</sup>

Of a certain William Davidson, we are informed: "at a demonstration he protected the black flag with skull and cross bones, 'Let us die like Men and not be sold like Slaves,' the flag said." Davidson was a black man born in 1786 and executed in 1820. He was born in Kingston, Jamaica - erstwhile 'wickedest city on the earth' and notorious pirate capital. He spent three years at sea, was a trade unionist, read Tom Paine and may have had some connection to Toussaint L'Ouverture and the revolution in Haiti. He was finally executed on Mayday 1820 with others for being part of the 'Cato Street conspiracy' to assassinate the entire cabinet while they were at dinner. This was intended to lead to attacks on Mansion House and the Bank of England, the seizing of artillery and to give the spark for a revolution in Britain!<sup>53</sup>

**Be Proud to fly the Jolly Roger!**

## **Waging War on the Whalers**

Since 1977, modern-day, real-life pirates Sea Shepherd have roamed the world's oceans attacking and sinking whaling vessels and driftnetters. The black ship with a black pirate flag is

---

<sup>50</sup> Woodcock - *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (London, Penguin, 1963), p. 284; Jason Wehling - 'History of the Black Flag: Why Anarchists fly it. What are its origins?', in *Fifth Estate* (Vol. 32, #1, Summer 1997), p. 31; *Le Pirate: Journal Quotidien* #1-4 (1871) in University of Sussex Commune Collection - continuation of *Le Corsaire*.

<sup>51</sup> John Nicholson - *The Great Liberty Riot of 1780* (London, Bozo, 1985), pp. 44-46

<sup>52</sup> Bolster - *Black Jacks*, pp. 152-3

<sup>53</sup> For more on this check out two excellent pieces by Peter Linebaugh - 'Jubilating: Or, How The Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee Against Capitalism, With Some Success' in 'The New Enclosures': *Midnight Notes* #10 (1990), p. 92; and 'All the Atlantic Mountains Shook', in Eley and Hunt (eds.) - *Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaborations on the work of Christopher Hill* (London, Verso, 1988), p. 214. All you Sussex bioregionalists out there will be thrilled to discover a Brighton connection to this notorious conspiracy - one of the three executed was

equipped with spikes for ripping open the sides of enemy vessels and bows reinforced with 18 tons of concrete for ramming them. Flying their own version of the Jolly Roger - a skull above a crossed shepherd's crook and trident - 'Neptune's Navy' have engaged in over 20 years of guerrilla war for marine ecology: "Any whaling ship on the ocean is a target for Sea Shepherd."

**Sea Shepherd Conservation Society**

3107A Washington Boulevard

Marina del Ray

CA 90292

USA

Tel: +1 (310) 301 7325

**Source:** David B. Morris - *Earth Warrior* (Golden, Colorado, Fulcrum, 1995)

## Further Reading

Cordingly, David - *Life Among the Pirates: The Romance and the Reality* (London, Little, Brown & Co., 1995)

Cordingly, David (ed.) - *Pirates* (London, Salamander, 1996)

Hill, Christopher - *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth Century Controversies* (London, Penguin, 1996)

Hill, Christopher - 'Radical Pirates?' in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 3 (Brighton, Harvester, 1986); and in Margaret Jacob and James Jacob (eds.) - *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1984)

Klausmann, Ulrike, Marion Meinzerin and Gabriel Kuhn (trans. Nicholas Levis) - *Women Pirates and the Politics of the Jolly Roger* (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1997)

Rediker, Marcus B. - *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo- American Maritime World 1700-1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987)

Rediker, Marcus B. - 'Liberty beneath the Jolly Roger: The Lives of Anne Bonny and Mary Read, Pirates' in M. Creighton and L. Norling (eds.) - *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Atlantic Seafaring, 1700-1920* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1995)

Ritchie, Robert C. - *Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 1986)

Wilson, Peter Lamborn - *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegadoes* (New York, Autonomedia, 1995)

## Notes

---

a Brighton butcher called James Ings (perhaps recruited for his skill with a carving knife?), who said: "I will cut every head off that is in the room and Lord Castlereagh's head and Lord Sidmouth's I will bring away in a bag. For this purpose I will provide two bags." See Rocky Hill - *Underdog Brighton: A Rather Different History of the Town* (Brighton, Iconoclast Press, 1991), pp. 23-4, and John Stanhope - *The Cato Street Conspiracy* (London, Johnathan Cape, 1962), p. 87

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Do or Die  
Pirate Utopias  
Under the Banner of King Death  
Friday June 18th 1999

<http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/>

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)