Flying the Black Flag:
Golden Age of Piracy Deconstructed

Joe D. Beranek
History 489: Research Seminar
Fall 2018

Copyright for this work is owned by the author. This digital version is published by McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire with the consent of the author.
Contents

Figures Page iii

Abstract iv

Introduction: A Pirate’s Life for Me 1

Historiography: The Pirate Code 3

Understanding the Rise of the Golden Age: The Edge of the Map 7

Culture and Politics of Golden Age Pirates: Rise of the Buccaneer 11

European Response to Piracy: On the Hunt 16

Blackbeard as a Case Study: Man, Myth, and Legend 22

Conclusion: Sailing Into the Sunset 24

Bibliography 26
Figures

Figure 1: A map detailing the trade routes of individual goods sent back to their European powers.
Abstract

Piracy during the Golden Age has often been fantasized about through many forms of popular culture. The time period has been fictionalized and glorified by contemporary society, oftentimes weaving together factual accounts of the men and women who had a role in the Golden Age with dramatized fiction to provide us the tales of the swashbucklers we know today. What this research paper aims to do is to provide a factual account of what being a pirate in the Golden Age was truly like, while debunking the myths and legends that surround this era of maritime history.
Introduction: A Pirate’s Life For Me

The King and his men
stole the Queen from her bed
and bound her in her bones
the seas be ours and by the powers
where we will we’ll roam
Yo ho, all hands
Hoist the colors high
Heave ho, thieves and beggars
Never shall we die
Now some have died
and some are alive
and others sail on sea
with the keys to the cage
and the Devil to pay
we lay to Fiddler’s Green.
Yo ho, haul together
Hoist the colours high
Heave ho, thieves and beggars
Never shall we die¹

With the seas raging, waves rolling up and over the sides of the great hull, the dastardly
men and women of the pirate vessel the Queen Anne’s Revenge begin pulling on the mooring
line, in hopes of keeping their ship afloat. Just when all hope seems lost, a large, bellowing
figure booms out from the darkness, imploring his crew to keep going, else they be sent to the
depths of the rolling ocean squall (a sudden gust of wind). Any crewman found to be hiding in
cowardice would either be thrown overboard or shot. They were after a British Merchant ship,
ripe with spoils. The imposing figure is Blackbeard, the most notorious of all Golden Age
Pirates.² While the man known as Blackbeard was a very real historical figure during what is

¹ Hans Zimmer, Hoist the Colors (California: Walt Disney Records, 2007),

² A “golden age” for piracy is defined as a period of time where there is a large outburst
of piracy. There have been multiple points in the history of piracy that could be referred to as the
often considered to be the Golden Age of Piracy, this scene is a fictitious scene fabricated by this author.

Although a scenario such as this may have happened frequently during the Golden Age, it is often portrayed as the absolute norm by popular culture, both historically and in contemporary society. In today’s media world, viewers can see a wide variety of pirate representations, with major motion pictures such as the Pirates of the Caribbean series and the STARZ show “Black Sails.” We often see pirates pushed into the same variety of tropes. Pirates in popular culture are seen either as drunken reavers, taking any chance they can to steal, rape, or murder, or pirates are misunderstood noblemen, such as the representations seen in Assassin’s Creed 4: Black Flag, who operate under a code they must abide. There is very little middle ground presented in these forms of media and, are, to an extent, a fictitious representation of the criminal lifestyles that most Golden Age pirates employed.

In fact and reality, golden age pirates were a people who chose a life of violence and crime due to some of the circumstances of their modern society. Why would someone willingly choose an all-encompassing criminal lifestyle that affected a person’s culture, social standing, and physical well-being? European nations were sprawling and were interested in moving into the ‘new world’, into the western unknown of the edge of the map, hoisting the wealthy further into the upper echelons of high society while the gap between those fortunate individuals and families and the working class grew larger. While the rich got richer, the government and private

“golden age” of piracy, but, the time period most commonly referenced throughout western society is from 1650-1720. This research will mainly focus on Caribbean based pirates.

3 Andrew Lawler, ”Three Centuries After His Beheading, a Kinder, Gentler Blackbeard Emerges.” Smithsonian, November 13, 2018.
trading companies exercised more control over its people’s and newly acquired territories, prompting a mass exportation of an abundance of resources via new shipping lanes made possible through the advancement of shipping technology. The map was shrinking, wage working sailors were being paid less and working more, and society grew more and more civilized, a rebellion of sorts was bound to happen. Equally, individuals became more disillusioned with society, the better a criminal lifestyle sounded to so many. The lives of Golden Age pirates were not as glorious or glamourous as many of the Robin Hood-esque Hollywood adaptations would have you believe. Rather, buccaneers chose to enter the vast criminal enterprise of piracy due to their growing disillusionment with contemporary society and, within that vagabond society, formed a community of idealist individuals set on making a world of their own.

**Historiography: The Pirate Code**

While delving into the Golden Age of Piracy seems to be a hooking and engaging topic of study to the reader, there is some difficulty presented within the task of finding solid sources of information from which to draw information from. One of the prevailing reasons for the lack of primary sources during the Golden Age is due to the high number of illiterate persons operating as pirates during the golden age. While many seafaring individuals, both of legal and illegal operation, would have fit the standard for literacy during the Golden Age (the standard of possessing the ability of signing your name into the ship’s logbook), there were few sailors who possessed the gift of reading and writing.\(^4\) The ability to sign one’s name was the farthest most

---

persons before the mast got in the way of academic training, training that was used to divvy out payment in a free wage labor society. While those members of a ship deemed important enough to read, such as the captain, quartermaster, or officers if one were upon a naval vessel, those at the bottom of the hierarchy of importance aboard a vessel had little time to learn a skill that would not be useful in their daily duties. It made for a fascinating intertwinement of literate and illiterate lifestyles, prompting many of the stories and legends spouted by sailors to take on the form of oral traditions, often starting as stories told by those who could read. This may be a reason for many of the grandiose tales we are used to in contemporary representations of the Golden Age pirate.

Hollywood pirates have been dressed up into certain tropes that were also mentioned in the previous section of this work. While some of the source material used by those forms of media has some historical accuracy, many of the depictions take on some creative liberties that lead to falsehoods being taken as fact. For example, in the movie Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl, the city of Port Royal is presented as the base of British colonial operations during the early portion of the 18th century. While the British had taken control of the Jamaican region from the Spanish Empire during this point in time, the entire city was summarily destroyed by an earthquake in the year 1692, while the British attempt to rebuild the port city in 1705 failed due to a fire. In the film, the city is presented as a port of (mostly) law and order full of transplanted British citizens; historically, it was often regarded as a vile

5 Rediker, Between the Devil, 158.

cesspool of vagabonds and criminals with a reputation of scaring even the most underhanded of merchants away from using Port Royal to dock and trade.\textsuperscript{7}

Of course, we can draw some useful and relevant information from these Hollywood sources. They are, after all, a visual representation of the legends left behind from the individuals who actually lived through the Golden Age. One of the best representations made within the \textit{Pirates of the Caribbean} filmography is the physical representations of the characters within the film. Another famous fictitious Hollywood source would be the novel \textit{Treasure Island} by Robert Louis Stevenson. While the story may be mostly made up of neatly woven together legends and myths, it does characterize and draw from factual history several famous persons who committed acts of piracy, mainly William Kidd, Edward Teach, and Bartholomew Roberts.\textsuperscript{8} While one must be diligent in discerning the inaccuracies from fact, we can glean some useful information in creating juxtaposition when comparing the Hollywood representations of pirates to the actual buccaneers operating within the time period.

With what primary sources available to historians, the most important and only concrete sources come from court proceedings that involved persons being accused and tried for piracy and correspondence of those people that were affected by piracy. One of the court cases involving those persons convicted of piracy was the \textit{Arraignment, Ttryal, and Condemnation of Capt. John Quelch}, a pirate captain who is lesser known than the usual suspects seen in the Hollywood sources of contemporary popular culture. Captain Quelch and his men were originally commissioned by Queen Anne to operate under the legality of privateering, a practice of piracy that was allowed and commissioned by monarchs so that they could have the chance of

\textsuperscript{7} Rediker, 59.

\textsuperscript{8} Stevenson, Brock, and Gilpin. \textit{Treasure Island}, 2017.
stealing their rival monarch’s resources. While Quelch was operating under a legal agreement with England, Quelch and his crew seized a Portuguese vessel off of the coast of Brazil. While one might think Quelch was doing his job, the British and Portuguese were allies (Quelch’s commission only allowed for the seizure and sinking of British and Spanish ships), meaning that any treachery towards the Portuguese empire would cause undue stress upon that relationship. This source shares vital information about what a real pirate’s exploits may have been like, along with providing source material to the nature of the Admiralty courts, a phenomenon that was brought about to combat the growing tide of piracy.

In terms of secondary sources, the leading author with scholarly authority of piracy and seafaring individuals during the time period of the Golden Age is Marcus Rediker. With titles such as *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700 – 1750* and *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Rediker encompasses a history of this time period in a fashion unlike any other scholar of the time period. The source material provided by Rediker as well as Rediker and Linebaugh are the best secondary sources available on the Golden Age of Piracy. A breadth of the information that will be offered within this work will be drawn from his source material, as well as being supplemented with

---


information from a source material titled *A General History of the Pyrates, From Their First Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence to the Present Time.*¹² What makes this a compelling source of information is that this book was published in the year 1724, and while it may be filled with many of the superstitious legends that have been retold by Hollywood, it holds significant weight in understanding how Pirates were represented directly after the Golden Age. It was originally written as a secondary resource and history of famous pirates; however, due to its historic significance, it can be utilized as a primary source of information.

A variety of other secondary authors will also be utilized throughout this paper. Ralph T. Ward’s work *Pirates in History*, much like Rediker’s works, attempts to establish an overview of piracy, from its origins to its demise in the early eighteenth century.¹³ Oscar Herrman and Frank Sherry offer similar historical overviews of Golden Age pirates, specifically focusing on the Caribbean pirates that have become so notorious. Peter Leeson’s work on the economics of piracy during this era is an important work in detailing the payment of those who participated in the criminal lifestyle.

**Understanding the Rise of the Golden Age: The Edge of the Map**

In an effort to expand exploration, advancements needed to be made if the powers were going to stay ahead of their competitors. To truly understand the nature of this expansion, we need to go back to pre-Golden Age oceanic technology. One of the largest innovations in maritime technology seen during this point in history was the arrival of the caravel. The caravel,

---


originally crafted by the Portugese empire, was the answer to much of what had plagued the Europeans in attempting to reach the American continents prior to and during the early portion of the Golden Age. In Ralph T. Ward’s work titled Pirates in History (1974), Ward describes these modern marvels of sailing in great detail:

The sturdy caravels that sailed from the busy ports of Portugal to the Canary Islands of the Azores, and down the coast of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope, set the European nations on a course of world discovery and colonial development. The consolidation of power in the hands of strong central governments and the wealth created by the new commercial revival in western Europe allowed for such oceanic expansion.14

The caravel allowed the European nations to reach lands which they never thought to be remotely possible in reaching, and created a new pathway to domestic and international wealth and power, allowing for goods, resources, and in particular gold and silver, to be transported across the waterways of the Atlantic Seas. One can easily imagine that, the abundance of raw materials that were being transported over the open sea lanes and the readily available and newly improved shipping capabilities meant that new opportunities were opened up for plunder, not only for the European empires and their military, but for a new class of seafaring danger.

Before we can begin to deconstruct piracy during the Golden Age and their daily exploits, it would be prudent to set the stage for their rise to criminal livelihood. What drove these individuals to risk it all and take on the expanding empires in search of personal gain? The reality of the situation was that the map was shrinking. Exploration had taken European powers to the ‘new world’, full of wonderment and riches, and began to colonize the area. For the specific purposes of this paper and to stay true to the members of pirate society that were typically considered to be from the Golden Age, the main focus will remain on those buccaneers

who operated up and down the North American Atlantic Coast and the Caribbean. As previously stated, the empires of Europe, including the English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, the Dane and Dutch (among others), all had their eyes set on westward expansion to feed their system of mercantilism. Mercantilism is a system set up by a regime’s economy to ensure wealth is always coming into the nation by exporting more of their homemade products more than they import foreign goods. While this was all well and good, there were some issues with the system that the European powers were forced to confront, the first being the necessity of a market that is demanding a large amount of another market’s goods. Thus, once the European powers had intelligence of this newfound landmass, they believed that they had found the solution to their problem. The image below shows the European nations trade routes, what they were importing and exporting, and the territory controlled by those nations.

Figure 1: A map detailing the trade routes of individual goods sent back to their European powers. This helps give a sense of the colonialism that spread over the territory.

While the European empires had solved their first problem regarding the system of mercantilism, another issue would arise that would spark the tide of piracy. The merchant class at the top of the cultural hierarchy of the time became very wealthy due to their overseas investment while the outsourcing of materials and jobs meant the lower class populations of laborers at the bottom of the hierarchy found themselves worse off than prior to expansion.\textsuperscript{16} The rich merchant class further consolidated their power over the region by forming chartered companies, meaning they had the full support of the crown of whichever empire they hailed from to do as they pleased, so long as they paid tribute to the crown. This lead to the formation of well-known companies such as the East India Company, the Royal African Company, and the Dutch East India Company.\textsuperscript{17}

The collection of wealthy merchants pooled their capital to form powerful sub-empires of their own, dominating their respective regions. They cultivated their wealth by utilizing a new and revolutionary concept of wholly American origins: the plantation.\textsuperscript{18} Operated by stolen African natives taken to be chattel all throughout the newly colonized region, slaves experienced some of the worst atrocities committed against other humans while working on harvesting sugar cane in the East Indies. Of course, there were other, more lucrative goods to be found in the Americas. The Spanish holdings in ‘New Spain,’ today’s region of Mexico and the southwestern portion of the United States, had an abundance of silver (as well as gold) found in the region,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{16} Linebaugh and Rediker, 77.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{17} Rediker, \textit{Between the Devil}, 18-19.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{18} Linebaugh and Rediker, 149.
\end{quote}
much to the interest of the crown of many of the European powers beginning to establish their control in the area.

This collection of merchants and trading companies had set up a monopoly of trade. Those seeking to move into the trade and merchant business had to seek business opportunities elsewhere, mainly the newfound colonies along the North American coastline. With so many of the world powers vying for maritime supremacy, tensions were high and clashes between the powers would soon come to a head, the first shots being fired between the Dutch and English in 1651, given express permission to attack the crown’s enemies in their best interest. Soon, military action was ramped up, prompting the empires’ navies to become involved in protecting the sea routes being used by their merchants. The British then passed the Navigation Act of 1651, mandating that all goods being brought into British ports should be sailed by Englishmen aboard English made vessels. Acts such as these prompted a desire to protect what was so recently gained in overseas assets that the European powers hoped to exploit.

**Culture and Politics of Golden Age Pirates: Rise of the Buccaneer**

Of course, the overseas expansion led to openings for seafaring pirates. The opportunity being too great to pass up when compared to the alternative, these men and women were more than happy to risk imprisonment and death to get rich quick in a world that had done them no favors up until that point. Clearly, there was a large class of individuals who believed in a pirate cause, as there were at least 1,000-2,000 pirates operating at any given point throughout

---


21 Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 255.
the period of the Golden Age.\textsuperscript{22} The average pirate fell between the age of 17 and 50, while sources show that very few women were known to be pirates during this time period, mostly because sailors were superstitious of women aboard a ship. Of course, the individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy would not have taken issues with these vagabonds, seeing as they were stealing from the rich merchant class and exploiting their lucrative trade businesses. The buccaneers would troll and terrorize the established sea lanes between the new colonies and their respective European powers, striking out at any ship that held promise for resources that could easily be sold off; regardless of the colors they flew. The nature of their business brought about the necessity of having a port with which to call their own, meaning they would have to establish themselves enough to hold a territory against the Royal Navy, the Spanish Navy, and so on. The most opportune port was that of the Bahamas’, left without a government after raids by both the Spanish and French had left the old fort abandoned and in rubble, the settlements mostly destroyed, and the inhabitants scattered abroad without a government in place to aid in putting down the unrest these actions had caused.\textsuperscript{23}

The far reaching arm of the pirates spread to the coast of Africa, as well as along the North American coast, much to the dismay and discouragement of many governors in the new colonies. Wherever the bounty of resources and wealth went, so too did the pirate bands who were eager to get their hands on the newly discovered riches. However, the majority of pirates preferred the heavily used shipping lanes of the Caribbean seas as these lanes were the homes of lucrative opportunities, favoring their shallow waters and small inlets, many of which would prove difficult to any large naval vessel that gave chase to the criminals.\textsuperscript{24} This tactical

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 256.
\textsuperscript{23} Defoe and Johnson, \textit{A General History of the Pyrates}, 30-31.
advantage was easy for many of the pirate crew to understand, as a wide variety of these individuals had previous working experiences aboard naval vessels, working aboard the merchant ships that would be taking the wealth back to Europe, or as commissioned privateers whose job it was to hunt pirates. There were litanies of reasons for so many of these men to leave guaranteed pay to become criminals: conditions at sea were deplorable, oftentimes the crew would run short of food and water rations, disease was prominent aboard these vessels, and the wages paid to sailors were miserably low. It is said that one ship plundered by pirates would be equal to earning nearly forty years’ worth of wages working aboard a merchant or naval vessel. It also goes without saying that these men were disciplined very severely if they were unable to perform their duties, prompting a rash of desertion.

The background of those men and women who would be working aboard a pirate vessel and the hardships many had experienced aboard ‘legal and civilized’ ships meant that those acting as Captain had a delicate job to do when organizing their manpower and keeping the crew in a happy state. Historian Oscar Herrmann argues that there was an unbreakable code of egalitarianism honored by both captain and crew, writing:

…the they were rigorously governed by an iron hand and by the unwritten "code of honor." A pirate entered upon "the account" (a term meaning piracy) by taking the oath of fealty to the cause, abjuring all social ties, pledging himself never to desert his ship or defraud his comrades or steal anything belonging to his fellows. Having thus bound him by an oath firm and dreadful in its malediction upon any violation of its terms, the organization is completed by the selection of a captain, who, usually, is the strongest, bravest, and most desperate of them all, well calculated to keep the crew in subjection. Mutiny and the spirit of insubordination frequently raised its ominous growl, to be quelled only by the fearlessness of the captain and his ability to keep his men in abject fear of his commands.

---

24 Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 257.
This code of ethics is not something that a person with average knowledge of the time period or those of us who would take in a Hollywood adaptation of piracy would be able to see or grasp. This agreement between captain and crew, whether it be before the starting of a new voyage or upon the election of a new captain, was often drafted by someone with the ability to read and write, and was subsequently signed by the captain and crew.\textsuperscript{28} Although the captain was to lead the crew to an abundance of wealth and riches by navigating the perilous seas, he was thought of as an equal to the crew. Something that is often portrayed in Hollywood adaptations of maritime buccaneer vessels during the age of sail, those captains held their own private quarters. In fact, captains weren’t even afforded a bed, as the crew slept where they pleased aboard the pirate vessel.\textsuperscript{29}

Crews also kept a system of checks and balances by electing a quartermaster, who would keep the best interest of the crew as his primary responsibility. While on the outside looking in, one may think that pirate crews held all of the power while aboard the ship; rather, it was a highly democratic system meant to hold those in positions of authority to their word while ensuring the prosperous exploits of all those aboard the ship. As Defoe states, “At length the Captain made use of his power to determine this dispute, which, in these cases, is absolute and uncontrollable, by their own laws, in fightings’ chasing or being chased. In all other Matters whatsoever, he is governed by a Majority.”\textsuperscript{30} In the most crucial of decisions, the captain and


\textsuperscript{28} Defoe and Johnson, \textit{A General History of the Pyrates}, 167, 211-213, 298, 307-308.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 121, 139.

\textsuperscript{30} Defoe and Johnson, \textit{A General History of the Pyrates}, 146.
quartermaster could call a council, in which every sailor before the mast would come together to
determine their next move.

This community of sorts had their own feel and culture to it, one that would spread to the
way they carried themselves to the very language that they spoke. It is often said and portrayed
that pirates were of the most foul-mouthed of individuals, and, to an extent, this was true. Pirates
used this language with pride, as an extension of their disillusionment with civilized folks and
continued support of a free lifestyle.\textsuperscript{31} It is clear that these pirates took severe pride in their
phraseology and the way they carried themselves, as evidenced by the naming of their ships and
the flags that they flew. With the namesake of \textit{The Queen Anne’s Revenge} being given to
Edward ‘Blackbeard’ Teach’s ship, that alone was enough to strike fear into any sailor not flying
under the black flag. When the ‘Jolly Roger’ was hoisted, many sailors opted to surrender
without a fight, lest they lose their lives protecting a bounty that they had no stake in.\textsuperscript{32} Marcus
Rediker notes that the flags pirates flew had some distinct symbolism interwoven in its attempt
to frighten their victim into submission:

\begin{quote}
The flag was intended to terrify the pirates’ prey, but its triad of interlocking
symbols – death, violence, limited time – simultaneously pointed to meaningful
parts of the seaman’s experience and eloquently bespoke the pirates’ own
consciousness of themselves as preyed upon in turn…Seaman who became pirates
escaped from one closed system only to find themselves encased in another. But
as pirates – and, some believed, only as pirates – these men were able to fight
back beneath the somber colors of “King Death.”\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

One can see, through all of their faults, pirates were in fact idealist. They were obsessed with
bringing justice to those who had wronged them and felt justified in their taking action against

\textsuperscript{31} Rediker, \textit{Between the Devil}, 278.
\textsuperscript{32} Defoe and Johnson, 250.
\textsuperscript{33} Rediker, \textit{Between the Devil}, 278.
contemporary greed and power hungry nature. Pirates prided themselves on adhering to their strict code and ethos, taking a clear conscience to the grave, whether it is of natural causes, dying aboard their ship, or at the hands of the hangman’s noose.\textsuperscript{34}

\textbf{European Response to Piracy: On the Hunt}

To protect their overseas assets, the European powers, specifically England, had instituted a judicial system that would show no quarter to individuals who were accused of piracy. The Admiralty Court is a maritime trial system that handles all cases of crime or civil disputes at sea, while the Vice Admiralty Courts were colonial extensions of the Admiralty Court. One of the main features of the Vice Admiralty Courts employed by British Colonials was the lack of a jury of the defendant’s peers, an aspect of power control over those accused of piracy.

An interesting case study regarding Captain John Quelch comes about when going over the early history of Vice Admiralty Courts and their use in the Colonial Americas. One of Quelch’s claims to fame was that he was actually one of the first pirates to be tried within this maritime court of the English Colonies.\textsuperscript{35} Quelch had come into power aboard the privateering vessel \textit{Charles} by way of an election by the crew after the original captain Daniel Plowman had fallen ill. Originally, the \textit{Charles} had been given express written permission to attack French and

\textsuperscript{34} Defoe and Johnson, 327.

Spanish vessels off the coast of Newfoundland and Acadia. Only, upon the change in leadership, the privateering vessel took on a transformation into a vessel of piracy and crime, now bound for the South American continent. Quelch and his crew were found guilty within the court of international piracy, robbery, and murder of those aboard Portuguese vessels off of the coast of Brazil.

Quelch and most of his crew were convicted upon the testimony of three of their former colleagues, breaking the aforementioned code of honor held between pirates, to save themselves from being convicted and subsequently hanged themselves at the hands of the Vice Admiralty Court. Quelch and those accused attempted to defend themselves by claiming that they were serving the crown’s best interests by attacking ships of rival European empires competing for control over the region; however, the transcript of the court proceedings mentions several times over that the crown and the Portuguese empire had recently become allies, negating their argument. The court showed no mercy, sentencing Quelch and six of his crewman to be hanged for their crimes. In theory, the harshness and absoluteness of the Admiralty Courts were supposed to deter pirates from further testing the waters against Great Britain. All it did was strengthen the bonds felt between pirates and their resolve to bring justice to the rich and powerful. The English especially did themselves no favors when they officially ended the practice of privateering, contributing to the already growing number of unemployed sailors sitting idle, and prompting many to seek out opportunities amongst piracy.

37 Ibid, 2-4.
38 Ibid, 2-4.
Privateering was a practice where captains and crews were authorized by the government of their home country to attack and plunder their enemy’s vessels. Although privateering was a legal practice and recognized by the European empires, it truly was a form of piracy in its own right, allowing for the seizure of specific vessels and requiring that the captors paid tribute to the crown.⁴¹ Of the more successful privateers was Woodes Rogers, who earned praise for his successful expedition spanning the years of 1708-1711 which brought down many buccaneers and also brought the arrest of one of his own crew, Peter Clark, for lamenting the mission and wishing for a pirate attack upon themselves.⁴²

The fame of Woodes Rogers’s successful privateering campaign lead the crown to commission his help once again, to bring the Bahaman Islands, specifically the island of New Providence, to heel.⁴³ Rogers came into the area with two naval ships in tow to the base of operations for many prominent Caribbean pirates, including Charles Vane and his associates. Rogers came bearing a royal pardon for any and all those persons suspected of piracy, those wanted for piracy, and those known associates of pirates. All but two of the pirate captains that were on the island and called it home readily accepted the Crown’s pardon, receiving official certificates of pardon. The two pirates who chose to fight the powerful nation, Jack Rackham and Charles Vane, narrowly evaded the trap set by the men of war by using a captured vessel as a destructive fire ship to help blast their way out of the harbor.⁴⁴ Vane would never return to the

---

⁴⁰ Rediker, 282.


⁴² Rediker, 260.

⁴³ Ibid, 257.

⁴⁴ Defoe, 60, 141, 150.
island, still surviving several attempts by the former pirate Benjamin Hournigold to kill or capture him.

Upon his arrival to the island, Rogers had singlehandedly quelled the center of pirate operations with the offer of mercy and a clean slate, and, on the outside looking in, we are left wondering why the pirates had little problem surrendering to Rogers and the crown’s pardon. After all, Nassau had been the home of the new piracy confederacy.\textsuperscript{45} Perhaps it was the deplorable conditions that the island of Nassau (New Providence to the Caribbean pirates) had fallen into after the twenty year occupation of the buccaneers. It could also be due to the fact that the civil unrest had gotten to be too much without a strong government to aid in the proper operation of the island.\textsuperscript{46} Or, the pirates of the time period could see the writing on the wall; the European empires had their sights set on quelling this problem once and for all, showing ruthless brutality in doing so. A way out and a welcome back into contemporary society was more important than holding on to the idealist society that turned into a lost cause.

Although European profits were soaring during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century for both merchant companies and their respective monarchs alike, the toll that piracy was having in newly colonized regions could not be ignored forever. According to some sources of the time period, pirates had already done nearly one hundred thousand pounds worth of damage to the Northern and Western African Coastline by the year 1720. The European nations and clans of pirates had been clashing for decades by the year 1700 rolled through, and they needed a new system of combatting the abuse and harassment their merchant and naval sailors were taking upon the open seas. Oftentimes, both pirates and government officials of the European continent


\textsuperscript{46} Defoe, 30-31.
would offer lofty sums of payment for the capture or killing of notorious persons, either for their crimes against humanity or for their efforts to suppress the piratical acts. These actions were of little consequence to either side of the conflict, prompting more petitions to be made to the parliament or governmental body for more concerted protection over the merchandise.

Alexander Spotswood, the governor of Virginia during the year 1724, pleaded his case to London, stating:

> Your Lordships will easily conceive my Meaning when you reflect on the Vigorous part I’ve acted to suppress Pirates: and if those barbarous Wretches can be moved to cut off the Nose and Ears of a Master for but correcting his own Sailors, what inhuman treatment must I expect, should I fall within their power, who have been markt as the principle object of their vengeance, for cutting off their arch Pirate Thatch (Edward ‘Blackbeard’ Teach), with all his grand Designs, and making so many of their Fraternity to swing in the open air of Virginia.

Within his correspondence, Spotswood mentions that he ‘cut off Thatch’; what he is referring to here is his authorization and orders to a privateering expedition with the sole mission of seeking out Blackbeard’s ship to destroy or capture The Queen Anne’s Revenge and killing the infamous pirate captain himself. The expedition was successful in their quest, bringing home Blackbeard’s severed head as a trophy for the Virginian governor. This was the extent that pirate hunting had gone to combat the criminal enterprise.

**Blackbeard as a Case Study: Man, Myth, and Legend**

Edward ‘Blackbeard’ Teach has grown to become the go-to representation of Golden Age pirates in postmodern, contemporary popular culture. He is often represented as a cruel figure, one who would light candles held by ribbons within his beard to intimidate his prey, carried ten plus pistols to inflict as much damage as possible, and was the most brutal of the Golden Age pirates. This is something that Blackbeard may have wanted for himself, as building up his own
legend would lead to easy targets and quick surrenders.\footnote{Rediker, 276.} This legendary, larger than life figure wasn’t lost on the Hollywood sources, says Andrew Lawler:

Blackbeard gained new notoriety in the mid-20th century, when the 1952 movie Blackbeard the Pirate proved popular. A half-dozen films centered on his exploits followed, and he emerged as the quintessential cinematic pirate. In 2006, he garnered his own miniseries detailing his search for Captain Kidd’s treasure. He even had an encounter with Jack Sparrow in the 2011 Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides. These representations further embellished a legend that long ago overwhelmed historical truth. “The real story of Blackbeard has gone untold for centuries,” says Baylus Brooks, a Florida-based maritime historian and genealogist.\footnote{Andrew Lawler, “Three Centuries After His Beheading, a Kinder, Gentler Blackbeard Emerges.” Smithsonian, November 13, 2018.}

Aside from the superstitious nature surrounding Blackbeard, his life and his exploits, little true and factual information had been afforded to historians. That all changed when Baylus Brooks, a Florida maritime historian, found a paper trail leading back to Blackbeard’s family. He followed the paper trail, learning that Edward Teach, baring the namesake of his father, had gifted his entire estate over to his Jamaican family, for whom he was very affectionate. He did this before joining the Royal Navy, possibly lending to the fact that he started his pirate career some ten years later, a career that spanned only two short years.\footnote{Defoe, 87-88.}

After his stint in the Royal Navy, Teach chased after the wreck of the Spanish treasure ship that had run aground due to an early hurricane, much like many of the Caribbean pirates during the Golden Age did when news spread of the Spanish demise. Researchers recovered his famous pirate ship, the \textit{Queen Anne’s Revenge} off of the coast of North Carolina, providing new insights into Teach’s life. His ship was loaded down with a variety of weapons, as 400 cannonballs and a large supply of muskets were found with the ship. The researchers also found
that disease may have been the biggest contributor to the loss of life aboard the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, as they were able to recover an old syringe with trace amounts of mercury, used to treat syphilis.\(^50\)

From these new findings, we are able to construct a clearer picture into the life of what a true pirate legend may have been like. We can see that he was a man of real conviction and had real motivations. The family he left behind had received his late father’s estate. We also can begin to understand how and why the legend of Blackbeard had grown. He was an educated sailor who understood the tactics and temperaments of the Royal Navy, among others, and it is clear that he wanted to be pictured as a cruel and villainous pirate. Finally, it aids in our understanding of the formation of the Hollywood pirate tropes that we are so used to seeing in contemporary popular culture and mass media, a figure who is equal parts ruthless, cunning, and generous in his stealing from the rich to lift the poor out of their misery.

**Conclusion: Sailing Into the Sunset**

As the Golden Age of piracy came to a close, pirate legends had been built and solidified, stories had been told a hundred times over, ensuring their survival and solidification of their place in the history books. Great Britain, amongst others, had successfully quelled the popular uprising of the criminal organization known as piracy, prompting the *History of the Pyrates* and a variety of other secondary sources that carried on the legendary exploits of these individuals, promoting popular culture to create their own spin-offs of their legends. While we can see that the legends of these individuals holds some truth within those stories, the superstitious retelling

---

\(^50\) Lawler, "Three Centuries After His Beheading, a Kinder, Gentler Blackbeard Emerges."
of the legends and stories allowed for contemporary viewers to look at the life and culture of piracy as a desirable condition to be a part of. Of course, there were reasons such as poverty, social classism, and lack of opportunity for personal growth to take the black flag and sail for personal gain. The pirates were an idealist class of people, practicing early forms of democracy and egalitarianism. They lived a tough life; however, through that medium, they were able to leave a lasting legacy of infamous exploits that still fascinate the mind today.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


