

Pirates and piracy

by Paul Millard

Piracy - the act of robbery from ships at sea - has existed for thousands of years. It was written about by the ancient Greeks and has been written about ever since. As long as some people have moved valuable cargo in ships, other people have wanted to rob them.

However, to most people in Britain and North America, piracy belongs to the Caribbean of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a time known to some as 'The Golden Age of Piracy'. This is the era of parrots sitting on shoulders, wooden legs, eye patches, metal hooks instead of hands and men with beards shouting, 'Aha me hearties'. And people robbing ships.

Many of these ideas and images come from books, such as Stevenson's 'Treasure Island', Defoe's 'King of Pyrates' and Barrie's 'Peter Pan'. As you may have noticed, pirates are well-represented in films and cartoons, from Errol Flynn to Walt Disney right up to the Curse of the Black Pearl.

Why is this era of piracy written about so much in English literature? One obvious reason is that the pirates were British and American. While many stories show them to be cruel robbers and killers, another view of piracy is commonly depicted, in which the pirates are much more heroic and adventurous. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that rebellious outlaws are often attractive figures, especially if they are from another time in history. More importantly, many pirates were acting in the national interest and became heroes for this. It was quite common for governments to give permission for pirates to attack ships belonging to enemy nations. These pirates were known as 'privateers'.

The British privateers in the Caribbean became famous because they were part of the long-running conflict with Spain for domination of the region and the world. One of England's great naval heroes, Sir Francis Drake, was really just a privateer who attacked Spanish ships. The rich cargoes of gold and silver leaving South America were an attractive target for him and many others that followed.

Similarly, pirates often have a heroic image in the United States because of their role in the War of Independence against Britain. Initially, the American navy was very small, so Congress encouraged privateers to attack British ships, which they did, in large numbers. For every ship in the American navy, there were at least ten pirate ships. These caused severe damage to Britain's ability to supply its army in North America. The privateers fought again in the War of 1812, most famously in New Orleans, where Jean Lafitte and his men played a vital role in the defence of the city.

There is another reason why pirates have a positive image in popular history. Most pirate ships were surprisingly egalitarian and democratic. It was normal for the captain to be elected and most issues were decided by a vote. The stolen goods were fairly divided amongst the crew members. Many pirates were men who had escaped from the harder discipline of the merchant ships and the navy. In their escape from authority, they created a model of a more just and fair society, many years ahead of the revolutions in America and France.

To many of us, pirates are an interesting and colourful part of history, useful as entertainment but not much else. However, modern piracy is alive and well and increasing every year. In 2002, there were 370 incidences of piracy world-wide. These days, the Caribbean is fairly quiet. The piracy hotspot now is Asia, particularly in the seas around Indonesia, where over a hundred pirate attacks took place.

Some acts of piracy are opportunistic, simple affairs – robbers boarding a ship that is waiting in a port, hoping to take money and anything else that can be easily carried. Others use advanced technology and are very organised. Sometimes, the pirates take the valuables from a ship and sometimes they

take the entire ship. This is especially true if the cargo is a valuable one that can easily be transferred to another ship, such as oil or gas. Very often, a stolen ship can be repainted, renamed and reused elsewhere. Operations of this size are difficult to hide and money is often paid to government officials to get their help and cooperation. Sometimes, government employees are the pirates – one victim of Asian piracy in the 1990s complained that his attackers appeared to be members of the Navy that was supposed to protect him.

Protecting ships is difficult. Most ships have fewer sailors than they did in the past, and they no longer carry weapons. One defence mechanism now on the market is an electric fence that deters attackers with a 9,000 volt shock. Whether it works or not, it is too late for the fourteen crew of one Indonesian vessel. On November 25th 2003, they became the year's final piracy statistic. Their tug boat was pulling a barge when they were attacked by fifteen pirates armed with guns. The crew were ordered to jump off the ship and swim to a nearby island. Fortunately, they all survived, but their ship and the pirates have disappeared.

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