



*Edward Teach, commonly called Blackbeard, was the best-known pirate captain of the Atlantic world during the early 18th century. Pursued by the Royal Navy, Teach was finally caught and executed in 1718.*

## Life Under the Jolly Roger

For centuries, as merchant ships plied the high seas, pirates lurked somewhere nearby to prey upon them. Usually murderous and cruel, such maritime brigands have seldom been completely lawless. Indeed, throughout history, and regardless of national origin, most freebooters have avoided anarchy; in some cases, they fashioned their own ethical codes as well as special notions of authority. Between 1716 and 1726, the brief heyday of Anglo-American piracy, thousands of men sailed under the Jolly Roger. Drawing upon 18th-century British archives, including the court records of sailors captured and tried for piracy, historian Marcus Rediker describes the unusual society of these “desperate Rogues” who not only dreamed of wealth and revenge but also claimed a certain fraternity and justice.

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*by Marcus Rediker*

Writing to the Board of Trade in 1724, Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia lamented his lack of “some safe opportunity to get home” to London. He insisted that he would travel only in a well-armed man-of-war.

“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 & 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 Teach, also known as Blackbeard], with all his grand Designs, & making so many of their Fraternity to swing in the open air of Virginia.”

Spotswood knew these pirates well. He had authorized the expedition that returned to Virginia claiming Blackbeard’s head as a trophy. He knew that pirates had a fondness for revenge, that they often punished captured ship captains for “correcting” their crews, and that a kind of “fraternity” prevailed among them. He had good reason to fear them.

Anglo-American pirates created a crisis for the Empire with their relentless attacks upon merchants’ property and international commerce

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between 1716 and 1726. Accordingly, these freebooters occupy a grand position in the long, grim history of robbery at sea. Their numbers, near 5,000, were extraordinary, and their plundering in the Atlantic and elsewhere was exceptional in both volume and value.

Piracy represented crime on a massive scale. It was a way of life voluntarily chosen, for the most part, by large numbers of men who directly challenged the harsh ways of the maritime society from which they excepted themselves. Beneath the Jolly Roger, "the banner of King Death," a new social world took shape once pirates had, as one of them put it, "the choice in themselves."

### Going on the Account

From records that describe the activities of pirate ships, and from reports or projections of crew sizes, it appears that 1,800 to 2,400 Anglo-American pirates prowled the seas between 1716 and 1718, 1,500 to 2,000 between 1719 and 1722, and 1,000 to 1,500, declining to fewer than 200, between 1723 and 1726. In the only estimate we have from the other side of the law, a band of pirates in 1716 claimed that "30 Company of them," or roughly 2,400 men, plied the oceans of the globe. In all, some 4,500 to 5,500 men went, as they called it, "upon the account." The pirates' chief scourge, Britain's Royal Navy, employed an average of only 13,000 men in any given year between 1716 and 1726.

These sea robbers preyed upon the most lucrative trade and, like their predecessors, sought bases for their depredations in the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Bahama Islands, undefended and ungoverned by the crown, began in 1716 to attract pirates by the hundreds. By 1718 a torrent of complaints had moved George I to commission Governor Woodes Rogers to lead an expedition to bring the islands under control. Rogers's efforts largely succeeded, and the pirates dispersed to the unpeopled inlets of the Carolinas and to Africa. They had frequented African shores as early as 1691; by 1718, Madagascar served as both an entrepôt for booty and a place for temporary settlement. At the mouth of the Sierra Leone River on Africa's west coast, pirates stopped off for "whoring and drinking" and to unload goods.

Theaters of operations for pirates shifted, however, according to the deployments of the Royal Navy. Pirates favored the Caribbean's small, unsettled cays and shallow waters, which proved hard to negotiate for the men-of-war that gave chase. But generally, as one pirate noted, these

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*The notorious women pirates Mary Read and Anne Bonny proved to be as bold as any of Calico Jack Rackam's crew. By "pleading their bellies" (pregnancy) at their trials in 1721, they both managed to dodge the gallows.*

rovers were "dispers't into several parts of the World." Sea robbers sought and usually found bases near major trade routes, as distant as possible from the powers of the state.

Almost all the pirates had earlier labored as merchant seamen, Royal Navy sailors, or privateersmen.\* The vast majority came from captured merchantmen as volunteers, for reasons suggested by Dr. Samuel Johnson's observation that "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."

Dr. Johnson had a point. Service aboard ship did not differ essentially from incarceration in a jail. Life was harsh in both places. During the early 18th century, disease, accidents, and death were commonplace aboard ships; natural disasters threatened incessantly, rations were often meager, and discipline was brutal, even murderous on occasion. Peacetime wages were low; there were fraud and irregularities in the distribution of pay. British merchant seamen also had to face the constant risk of impressment by the Royal Navy, whose commanders sought recruits on land and sea.

\*Privateers were privately owned armed vessels licensed by governments in time of war to capture the merchant ships of an enemy. Proceeds were distributed among king, investors, ship's officers, and seamen. Privateering was abolished by the Declaration of Paris in 1856.

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Some pirates had served in the fleet, where conditions aboard ship were no less harsh. Food supplies often ran short, pay was low, mortality was high, discipline severe, and desertion consequently chronic. As one officer reported, the Royal Navy had trouble fighting pirates because the king's ships were "so much disabled by sickness, death, and desertion of their seamen."

Pirates who had served on privateering vessels knew well that such employment was far less onerous than that on merchant or naval ships. Food was usually more plentiful, the pay higher, and the work shifts generally shorter. Even so, owing to rigid discipline and other grievances, mutinies were not uncommon. During Woodes Rogers's successful privateering expedition against the Spanish (1708–11), one Peter Clark was thrown into irons for wishing himself "aboard a Pirate" and saying that "he should be glad that an Enemy, who could over-power us, was a-long-side of us."

Most men became pirates when their merchant vessels were captured. Colonel Benjamin Bennet wrote to the Council of Trade and Plantations in 1718, setting forth his worries about freebooters in the West Indies: "I fear they will soon multiply for so many are willing to joyn with them when taken." The seizure of a merchant ship was usually followed by a moment of great drama. The pirate captain asked the assembled seamen of the captured vessel who among them would serve under the Jolly Roger, and frequently several stepped forward. Far fewer pirates began as mutineers who had collectively seized control of a merchant vessel. But piracy was not an option open to landlubbers, since sea robbers, Daniel Defoe observed, "entertain'd so contemptible a Notion of Landmen."

### **Rank Hath No Privileges**

Ages are known for 117 pirates active between 1716 and 1726. The range was 17 to 50 years, the mean 27.4, and the median 27; the 20-24 and 25-29 age categories had the highest concentrations, with 39 and 37 men, respectively. Three in five were 25 or older. The age distribution was almost identical to that of the British merchant service as a whole, suggesting that piracy held roughly equal attraction for sailors of all ages.

Though evidence is sketchy, most pirates seem not to have been bound to land and home by familial ties or obligations. Wives and children were rarely mentioned in the records of trials of pirates, and pirate vessels, to forestall desertion, often would "take no Married Man." Almost without exception, pirates, like the larger body of seafaring men, came from the lowest social classes in Britain and its American colonies. They were, as a royal official observed, "desperate Rogues" who could see little hope in life ashore.

Yet contemporaries who claimed that pirates had "no regular command among them" mistook a different social order—different from the hierarchy aboard merchant, naval, and privateering vessels—for disorder. This arrangement was conceived by the pirates themselves. Their hall-

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mark was a rough, improvised egalitarianism that placed authority in the collective hands of the crew.

A striking uniformity of rules and customs prevailed aboard pirate ships, each of which functioned under the terms of written "articles"—a compact drawn up at the beginning of a voyage or upon election of a new captain, and agreed to by the crew. Under these articles, crews allocated authority, distributed plunder, and enforced discipline. In effect, these arrangements made the captain the creature of his crew.

Favoring someone both bold of temper and skilled in navigation, the sailors elected their captain. They gave him few privileges. He "or any other Officer is allowed no more [food] than another man, nay, the Captain cannot keep his Cabbin to himself." William Snelgrave, a merchant captain seized by pirates, noted with displeasure that the crew slept on the ship wherever they pleased, "the Captain himself not being allowed a Bed."

### Distributing Plunder

The crew granted the captain unquestioned authority "in fighting, chasing, or being chased," but "in all other Matters whatsoever" he was "governed by a Majority." As the majority chose, so did it depose. Captains were ousted from their positions for cowardice, cruelty, or refusing "to take and plunder English Vessels." One captain incurred the class-conscious wrath of his crew for being too "Gentlemen-like." Occasionally, a despotic captain was summarily executed. As pirate Francis Kennedy explained, most sea robbers, "having suffered formerly from the ill-treatment of their officers, provided carefully against any such evil" once they arranged their own command.

To prevent the misuse of authority, pirates delegated countervailing powers to the quartermaster, who was elected to represent and protect "the Interest of the Crew." The quartermaster, who was not considered an officer in the merchant service, was elevated to a position of trust and authority. His tasks were to adjudicate minor disputes, to distribute food and money, and, in some instances, to lead the attacks on prize vessels. He served as a "civil Magistrate" and dispensed necessities "with an Equality to them all," carefully guarding against the galling and divisive use of privilege and preferment that characterized the distribution of the necessities of life in other maritime occupations. This dual authority was a distinctive feature of pirate vessels.

The decisions that had the greatest bearing on the welfare of the crew were generally reserved to the council, the highest authority on the pirate ship. Pirates drew upon an ancient custom, largely forgotten by the 18th century, under which the master consulted his entire crew in making crucial decisions. The council determined such matters as where the best prizes could be taken and how any dissension was to be resolved. Some crews resorted frequently to the council, "carrying every thing by a majority of votes"; others set up the council as a court. The decisions made by

this body were sacrosanct, and even the boldest captain dared not challenge a council's mandate.

The distribution of plunder was regulated explicitly by the ship's articles, which allocated booty according to skills and duties. Abolishing the wage relation, pirates turned to a share system to allocate their take. Captain and quartermaster each received from one and one-half to two shares; gunners, boatswains, mates, carpenters, and doctors, one and one-quarter to one and one-half; all others got one share each. The pay system represented a radical departure from the highly unequal allocation of pay in the merchant service, Royal Navy, or privateering. Indeed, the pirates devised perhaps one of the most egalitarian plans for the disposition of resources to be found anywhere in the early 18th century.

But not all booty was dispensed this way. A portion went into a "common fund" to provide for the men who sustained lasting injury. The loss of eyesight or any appendage merited special compensation. This rudimentary welfare system served to guard against debilities caused by accidents, to protect skills, to enhance recruitment, and to promote loyalty within the group.

The articles also regulated discipline aboard ship, though "discipline" is perhaps a misnomer for a system of rules that left large ranges of



*A pirate is hanged at Execution Dock in Wapping, London. British authorities hoped that such public hangings in the city's largest seafaring neighborhood would discourage any would-be buccaneers.*

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behavior uncontrolled. Less arbitrary than that of the merchant service and less codified than that of the Royal Navy, discipline among pirates always depended on a collective sense of transgression. Many misdeeds were accorded "what Punishment the Captain and Majority of the Company shall think fit," and it is noteworthy that pirates did not often resort to the whip.

Three major methods of discipline were employed, all conditioned by the fact that pirate ships were crowded; an average crew numbered near 80 on a 250-ton vessel. The articles of Bartholomew Roberts's ship revealed one tactic for maintaining order: "No striking one another on board, but every Man's Quarrels to be ended on Shore at Sword and Pistol." By taking such conflicts off the ship (and symbolically off the sea), this practice was designed to promote harmony in the crowded quarters below decks.

### Regulating Conflict

The ideal of harmony was also enforced through the decision to make a crew member the "Governor of an Island." Men who were incorrigibly disruptive or who transgressed important rules were simply marooned. For defrauding his mates by taking more than a proper share of plunder, for malingering during battle, for keeping secrets from the crew, or for stealing, a pirate risked being deposited "where he was sure to encounter Hardships."

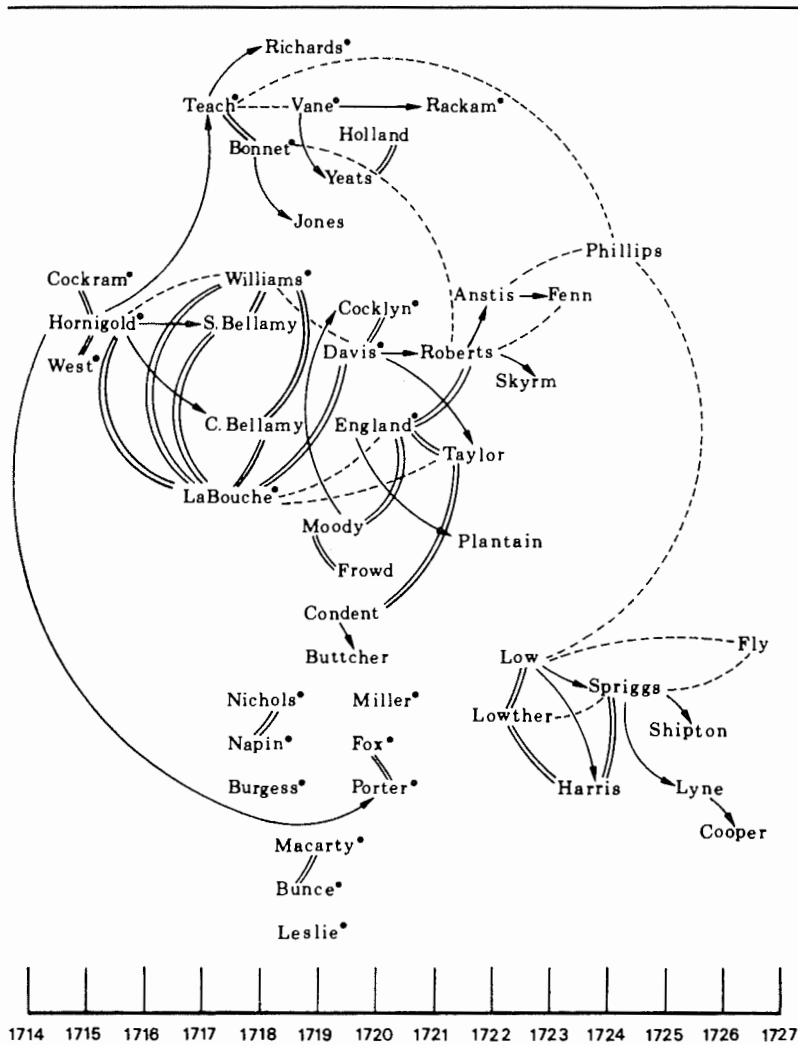
The ultimate sanction was execution. This penalty was imposed for bringing on board "a Boy or a Woman" or for meddling with a "prudent Woman" on a prize ship, but was most commonly invoked to punish a captain who abused his authority. Some crews attempted to avoid disciplinary problems by taking as a recruit "no Body against their Wills." By the same logic, they would keep no unwilling person.

Yet for all the efforts to limit authority and to maintain harmony, conflict could not always be contained. Occasionally upon election of a new captain, men who favored other leadership drew up new articles, took another ship, and sailed away from their former mates. But the very process by which new crews were established helped to ensure a social uniformity and, as we shall see, a sense of fraternity among pirates.

One important mechanism in this continuity can be seen by charting the connections among pirate crews. The diagram on the following page, arranged according to vessel captaincy, demonstrates that by splintering, by sailing in consorts, or by other associations, roughly 3,600 pirates—more than 70 percent of all those active between 1716 and 1726—fit into two main lines of genealogical descent.

Captain Benjamin Hornigold and the pirate rendezvous in the Bahamas stood at the origin of an intricate lineage that ended with the hanging of John Phillips's crew in June 1724. The second line, spawned in the chance meeting of the lately mutinous crews of George Lowther and Edward Low in 1722, culminated in the British government's capture, trial,





Connections among Anglo-American pirate crews, 1714-26. [Key to symbols—(—) direct descent: crew division because of dispute, overcrowding, or election of a new captain; (=) sailed in consort; (- - -) other connection: common crew members, contact without sailing together; (•) used the Bahama Islands as rendezvous.]

and executions of William Fly and his men in July 1726. It was primarily within and through this network that the social organization of the pirate ship took on its significance, transmitting and preserving customs and meanings and helping to structure and perpetuate the pirates' social world.

Pirates constructed their own world in defiance of the one they left behind, particularly the maritime system of authority. At a trial in Boston

in 1718, merchant captain Thomas Checkley told of the capture of his ship by pirates who "pretended" he said, "to be Robin Hoods Men." Historian Eric Hobsbawm has defined such "social banditry" as a universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon, an "endemic peasant protest against oppression and poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich and the oppressors." Its goal is "a traditional world in which men are justly dealt with, not a new and perfect world"; Hobsbawm calls its advocates "revolutionary traditionalists." Pirates, of course, were not peasants, but they fit Hobsbawm's formulation in every other respect. Of special importance was their "cry for vengeance."

In his letter to the Board of Trade in 1724, Virginia's Governor Spotswood told no more than the simple truth when he expressed his fear of pirate reprisals, for the very names of pirate ships made the same threat. Edward Teach, whom Spotswood's men captured and killed, called his vessel *Queen Anne's Revenge*; other notorious craft were Stede Bonnet's *Revenge* and John Cole's *New York Revenge's Revenge*. The foremost target of vengeance was the merchant captain, a man "past all restraint," who often made life miserable for his crew. Spotswood noted how pirates avenged the captain's past "correcting" of his sailors.

### Beasts of Prey

Upon seizing a merchantman, pirates often administered 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." Many captured captains were "barbarously used," and some were summarily executed. The punishment of captains was not indiscriminate: A captain who had been "an honest Fellow that never abused any Sailors" was often rewarded by pirates. To pirates, revenge was simply justice; punishment was meted out to barbarous captains, as befitted the captains' crimes.

Freebooters who fell into the hands of the British government were treated severely. The official view of piracy was outlined in 1718 by Vice-Admiralty Judge Nicholas Trott in his charge to the jury in the trial of Stede Bonnet and 33 members of his crew at Charleston, South Carolina. Declaring that "the Sea was given by God for the use of Men, and is subject to Dominion and Property, as well as the Land," Trott observed of the accused that "the Law of Nations never granted to them a Power to change the Right of Property." Pirates on trial were denied benefits of clergy, were "called *Hostis Humani Generis*, with whom neither Faith nor Oath" were to be kept, and were regarded as "*Brutes*, and *Beasts of Prey*." Turning from the jury to the accused, Trott circumspectly surmised that "no further Good or Benefit can be expected from you but by the Example of your Deaths."

The insistence on obtaining this final benefit locked royal officials and pirates into a war of reciprocal terror. Just as the authorities offered boun-

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ties for the capture of pirates, so did pirates “offer any price” for certain officials. The *American Weekly Mercury* reported that, in Virginia in 1720, one of six pirates facing the gallows “called for a Bottle of Wine, and taking a Glass of it, he Drank Damnation to the Governour and Confusion to the Colony, which the rest pledged.” Not to be outdone, Governor Spotswood thought it “necessary for the greater Terrour to hang up four of them in Chains.”

At the Charleston trial over which Trott presided, Richard Allen, attorney general of South Carolina, told the jury that “pirates prey upon all Mankind, their own Species and Fellow-Creatures without Distinction of Nations or Religions.” Allen was right in claiming that pirates did not respect nationality in their plunders, but he was wrong in claiming that they did not respect any of their “Fellow-Creatures.” Pirates did not prey on one another.

On the contrary, they showed a recurrent willingness to join forces at sea and in port. In April 1719, when Howell Davis sailed into the Sierra Leone River, the pirates captained by Thomas Cocklyn were wary until they saw on the approaching ship “her Black Flag”; then “immediately they were easy in their minds, and a little time after,” the crews “saluted one another with their Cannon.” Other crews exchanged similar greetings and, like Davis and Cocklyn who combined their forces, often invoked an unwritten code of hospitality to forge spontaneous alliances.

### Skull and Bones

Without a doubt, one of the strongest indicators of solidarity was the absence of discord among different pirate crews. To some extent, this was even a transnational matter: French, Dutch, Spanish, and Anglo-American pirates usually cooperated peaceably, only occasionally getting into conflict. Anglo-American crews consistently refused to attack one another.

In no way was the pirate sense of fraternity, which Governor Spotswood and others noted, better shown than in the threats and acts of revenge taken by pirates. Theirs was truly a case of hanging together or being hanged separately. In April 1717, the pirate ship *Whidah* was wrecked near Boston. Most of its crew perished; the survivors were jailed. In July, Thomas Fox, a Boston ship captain, was taken by other pirates who “Questioned him whether anything was done to the Pyrates in Boston Goall,” promising “that if the Prisoners Suffered they would Kill every Body they took belonging to New England.” Shortly after this incident, Teach’s crew captured a merchant vessel and, “because she belonged to Boston, [Teach] alledging the People of Boston had hanged some of the Pirates, so burnt her.” Teach declared that all Boston ships deserved a similar fate.

In January 1724, Lieutenant Governor Charles Hope of Bermuda wrote to the Board of Trade that he found it difficult to procure trial evidence against pirates because residents “feared that this very execution

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would make our vessels fare the worse for it, when they happen'd to fall into pirate hands." The threats of revenge were sometimes effective.

Pirates also affirmed their unity symbolically. Certainly the best-known symbol of piracy is the flag, the Jolly Roger. Less known is the fact that the flag was very widely used. No fewer, and probably a great many more, than 2,500 men sailed under this banner alone. The Jolly Roger was described as a "black Ensign, in the Middle of which is a large white Skeleton with a Dart in one hand striking a bleeding Heart, and in the other an Hour Glass." Although there was considerable variation in particulars among these flags, there was also a general uniformity of chosen images. The flag's background was black, adorned with white representational figures. The most common symbol was the human skull, or "death's head," sometimes isolated but more frequently the most prominent feature of an entire skeleton. Other recurring items were a weapon—cutlass, sword, or dart—and an hour glass.

### Cleansing the Seas

The flag was intended to terrify the pirate's prey, but its 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 return.

The self-righteousness of many Anglo-American pirates was strongly linked to their vision of a world—traditional, mythical, or utopian—"in which men are justly dealt with," as described by Hobsbawm. Indeed, some authorities, including the British Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, feared that pirates might "set up a sort of Commonwealth" in uninhabited regions, since "no Power in those Parts of the World could have been able to dispute it with them."

But piracy never took national shape, and indeed, by 1726, it had been effectively suppressed by vigorous governmental action. Circumstantial factors such as the remobilization of the Royal Navy cannot account fully for its demise. The number of men in the fleet increased from 6,298 in 1725 to 16,872 in 1726 and again to 20,697 in 1727, which had some bearing on the declining number of sea robbers. Yet some 20,000 sailors had been in the navy in 1719 and 1720, years when pirates were numerous. Seafaring wages only occasionally rose above 30 shillings per month between 1713 and the mid-1730s. The conditions of life at sea did not change appreciably until Britain went to war with Spain in 1739.

The royal pardons offered to pirates in 1717 and 1718 failed to rid the sea of robbers. Since the pardons specified that only crimes committed at certain times and in particular regions would be forgiven, many pirates saw enormous latitude for official trickery and refused to surrender. The offer of amnesty having failed, royal officials intensified the naval campaign against piracy—with great and gruesome effect. Corpses dangled in chains in British ports around the world "as a Spectacle for the Warning of oth-

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ers." No fewer than 400, and probably 500 to 600, Anglo-American pirates were executed between 1716 and 1726. Parliament also passed laws that criminalized all contact with pirates. Anyone known to "truck, barter, exchange" with pirates, furnish them with stores, or even consult with them might be punished with death.

The campaign to cleanse the seas was supported by clergymen, royal officials, and publicists who variously sought, through sermons, proclamations, pamphlets, and the newspapers, to create an image of the pirate that would justify his extermination. Especially among seamen and dealers in stolen cargo, piracy had always depended in some measure on the rumors and tales of its successes. Not surprisingly, in 1722 and 1723, after a spate of well-publicized hangings and a burst of propaganda, the pirate population began to decline. By 1726, only a handful of the fraternity remained.

The Anglo-American pirates themselves unwittingly took a hand in their own destruction. From the outset, theirs had been a fragile existence. They produced nothing and had no secure place in the economic order. They had no nation, no home; they were widely dispersed; their community had virtually no geographic boundaries. Try as they might, they were unable to create reliable ways of replenishing their ranks or mobilizing their collective strength. These deficiencies made them, in the long run, relatively easy prey.

Although the heyday of the Anglo-American pirates soon passed, it remains a remarkable historical phenomenon. For a brief time, a sizeable number of desperate men lived beyond the church, beyond the family, and beyond disciplined labor. Using the sea to distance themselves from the powers of the state, they made a society in which poor men in canvas jackets and tarred breeches had "the choice in themselves."

