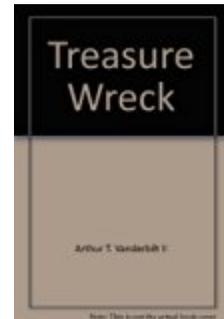


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arthur T. Vanderbilt. *Treasure Wreck: The Fortunes and Fate of the Pirate Ship Whydah*. Provincetown, Mass.: Cape Cod Pilgrim Memorial Association, 1992. x + 164 pp. \$8.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-945135-06-7.

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Arthur T. Vanderbilt's *Treasure Wreck* was ahead of its time when originally published in 1986, anticipating a series of works based on primary historical documents and which blend traditional historical scholarship with novelistic techniques. Two recent works by mainstream historians, Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* (1991) and John Demos's *The Unredeemed Captive* (1994) have provoked a great deal of discussion between historians concerned about crossing the divide between licensed historical speculation and outright fictionalizing. Happily, Vanderbilt's book is much less pretentious in these matters. It is, in fact, a well written book of local history intended for an audience used to browsing the bookshelves of small, independent booksellers in places like Provincetown W(the setting for this narrative), Salem, Ipswich, Gloucester, and other seaside communities in neighboring Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Maine. Anyone who has traveled to these communities knows that such small book shops are part of the unlimited appeal of the New England summer, and Vanderbilt University Press, on the basis of some republishing arrangement, has reissued Vanderbilt's original text, apparently without modification.

I would hesitate to call Arthur Vanderbilt an "amateur" historian, for one of the great assets of this text is a careful and methodical consideration of primary documents contained in the archives of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts State Archives, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Houghton Library of Harvard University. Nevertheless, Vanderbilt is a lawyer whose first-hand experiences on the Cape motivated him to write a narrative of the Whydah. It is not a scholarly treatment of the inter-colonial maritime competition, and it would be wrong to judge the book solely

by the standards of a traditional academic monograph. Not unlike the efforts of generations of "industrious Cape wreckers," Vanderbilt says in his Preface that he intended to rescue the legacy of the Whydah from the depths of folklore, legend and journalistic intrigue. Guided by his primary documents, Vanderbilt writes a compelling, if somewhat uncritical account of the shipwreck itself, the punishment of eight alleged pirates, and the unsuccessful efforts of Captain Cyrian Southack a few weeks after the disaster to salvage the ship. As a coda to the main tale, Vanderbilt offers the modern account of Barry Clifford, a Cape Cod real estate developer, whose eventual recovery of the Whydah and its artifacts generated a media spectacle and legal battle-royal between 1982-1984. Given the benefit of electronic mapping and sonar technology, Clifford managed to recover the ship's wealth against a depressingly bureaucratic background.

Vanderbilt's book has 9 chapters. The first chapter briefly recounts the exploits of England's arch-treasure hunter and future governor of the Dominion of New England, Sir William Phips. Phips's successful efforts to salvage some of the treasure from vessels of the Spanish fleet lost off the Bahama Banks near Haiti in 1687 was a point of pride in England's otherwise disappointing colonial progress during the eighteenth-century. Readers familiar with Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, will know this episode to be one of the "founding" moments of colonial political tradition. After the American revolution, Phips's exploits were recounted by writers influenced by Mather's history as an exemplum of American individualism and boldness. Mather, who appreciated Phips for his abilities as the Dominion governor (it was Phips who restored some civil order following the Salem witchcraft trials and the suspension of the colony's

original charter) used Phips's story to characterize what he considered to be typical features of the Puritan mission in the colony [1]. In his *Diary* Mather looked to Phips's heroism as an opportunity to "confound base Tories" who viewed the governor's abilities in the colonies with suspicion.

Vanderbilt is dimly aware of this tradition, claiming Phips as a "New England individualist {who} had brought back to London a mighty treasure indeed" (p. 9). However, Vanderbilt does not draw attention to the mythopoetic significance of Phips, and indeed, does not refer to Mather's politically cynical account in *Magnalia* at all. The significance of Phips's voyage for Vanderbilt is limited to a potent example of "treasure-fever," and to review the fact that England was interested in overcoming a profound status anxiety regarding its position in the New World in relation to the French and the Spanish.

The second chapter brings to light Samuel Bellamy, who would become the captain of a triad of vessels raiding off the coast of North America. Representing an outlaw tradition with an unknown background, Vanderbilt suggests that Bellamy, "like Phips, became obsessed with seeking his fortune by salvaging the sunken horde" of Spanish treasure believed to have belonged to a 10 ship fleet and which sank off the coast of Florida in a hurricane on July 30, 1715. Apocryphal stories abound about Bellamy's supposed lover, Maria Hallett, but Vanderbilt's introduction of their relationship relies on fiction, not fact. In later years, after the wreck of the *Whydah*, especially near the town of Eastham Massachusetts, Bellamy's lover would be transformed into Goodie Hallett, a spectre-woman who appears on the beaches to dance with the lost souls of the *Whydah* pirates. Vanderbilt uses the example of Bellamy to review popular notions about piracy, claiming, for instance, that their decision to adhere to a close standard of conduct and fair play make pirates a skewed, but nonetheless provocative, example of democratic sentiment.

Bellamy joined a pirate band in the spring of 1716 on a sloop called the *Mary Anne*. In June 1716, after the *Mary Anne's* captain refused to attack an English ship, Samuel Bellamy was elected by "a great majority" to lead the pirates. For much of the next year (1716-17) Bellamy chased and sacked a number of ships in the Caribbean and, by March 1717, his fleet had grown to include the *Sultana* and the *Whydah*, a 300 ton galley built to transport slaves from the trading port of *Whydah* on the Gold Coast of Africa for the Royal African Company. Bellamy utilized the ship, because of its bulk, to transport and

store his accumulated cargo taken from ships he victimized.

Chapter 3 details the progress of Bellamy's fleet north up the coast of Virginia towards Cape Cod. The crews, after battling a coastal storm, sought to enact the drama of the "Royal Pirate" based loosely on the exploits of Alexander the Great. In a fascinating anecdote, Vanderbilt suggests that some in the crew, not realizing the performance of a fight between sailors to be a part of the drama, started a melee in which one actor's arm was cut off and a grenade thrown amongst the players (p. 34). Talk about the power of the stage! If only this force could be distilled and brought to Broadway.

Chapter 4, using newspaper accounts and trial records, provides details of the storm that fell upon the *Whydah* 30 miles off the coast of Cape Cod, a portion of the coast between Monomoy near Chatham to Race Point at Provincetown notorious for treacherous submerged sandbars. This portion of the book has a great deal of local history in it, exploring the connotations of the area handed down by Nauset Indians and peculiar mythogeographic details of the coastline such as Slut's Bush, where the *Mary Anne* was driven ashore with 6 surviving crew. The *Whydah* was smashed into the shoals off the Cape and all except two were lost: Thomas Davis, a 22 year old prisoner who was later acquitted at the trial of the pirates in Boston, and John Julian, a Cape Cod Indian hired as a pilot. After the wreck, Vanderbilt celebrated the propensity for Cape Codders to be plucky and defiant of authority. Most of the wreckage was scuttled and stored in the cellars of Cape residents during the week it took for authorities in Boston to send an official delegate to investigate the wreck and recover the treasure for the Crown.

Chapters 5 and 6, drawing on Captain Cyprian Southack's letters and journals and issues of the *Boston News-Letter* between 1717-18, detail the earliest attempt to salvage the treasure on board the *Whydah* (chapter 5) and the criminal trials of eight of Bellamy's crew. As Vanderbilt shows, by reprinting a copy of Southack's map, the salvage mission was an almost complete failure; nonetheless, the excellent charts Southack prepared made it possible for the later discovery of the wreck using better technology and greater capital. Southack's experiences with Cape residents was the most frustrating aspect of his effort. Showing nothing but cheek during his entire search, Southack left the Cape feeling a bit despondent about his fellow citizens. In turn, of course, Cape residents started a cycle of tales claiming that Southack,

acting on his own behalf, had squirreled the goods away for himself and his heirs. Though much of this material must be apocryphal, it nonetheless reinforces a good many stereotypes about the New England posture.

The surviving sailors were speedily apprehended and delivered to Boston for trial in the tradition of William Kidd who was tried 17 years prior (1701). The punishment afforded pirates was meant to ensure maximum deterrence and to provide a satisfying public spectacle as well. The Boston Admiralty court found six of the pirates guilty and sentenced them to death by hanging; two were released on the rationale that they were compelled against their will to cooperate with Bellamy's crew.

Chapter 7 begins rather unfortunately with a stock caricature of the Reverend Cotton Mather drawn from sources that characterize Mather as a filiofietistic "prig." Although this distorted and reductionist view of Mather is common among his nineteenth-century biographers, especially Unitarians, it is quite surprising to see Vanderbilt lean so heavily on this view, particularly since the last 15 years have witnessed a far more critical and nuanced perspective on Mather and the third-generation Puritan descendants [2]. This re-evaluation of Cotton Mather began with two seminal biographies, David Levin's *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer* (1978) and Kenneth Silverman's *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (1984). Both of these works are listed in Vanderbilt's bibliography, but he seems to have read them only superficially claiming in his opening sentence, "The ordeal of the six imprisoned pirates of the Whydah had just begun, for frequently to study them and to save their souls came the famed ecclesiastic Cotton Mather." A bit later, Vanderbilt accepts a scholar's opinion that Mather's life "was at best the source of a profound revulsion, or at worst of an upset stomach." I don't mean to make too much of this point, but it is important to note here, as was the case in establishing a creditable background for the maritime history of piracy, Vanderbilt's aim is not to produce good scholarship, but more to entertain and reinforce the expectations of a more casual readership. Mather's account of the pirates and their downfall needs to be read in the larger context of Puritan execution sermons and the theosophical historicizing he began in *Magnalia*. Mather was always looking to portentous events that captivated the public's attention for moral, spiritual and pragmatic lessons, viewing history as an indented activity befitting New England's colonial status.

Chapter 8 very briefly reviews the historical legacy-ism associated with the wreck, the ship's presumed for-

tune in plundered treasure and the names and places where bric-a-brac attributed to the Whydah washed upon literal and imaginative shores. Here, in the mention of the wreck in 1898, is one of the few editorial lapses in the book. The Portland incident, recalled to illustrate the treacherous waters and low rates of survival in shipwrecks on the shoals off Cape Cod, is repeated from chapter four.

Chapter 9, undoubtedly the main premise for the original publication of the book in 1986, details the trials and tribulations of Barry Clifford's discovery of the Whydah wreck in 1983-84. The chapter gives Vanderbilt the opportunity to interleave the historical record with popular interest in the discovery, replete with its courtroom episodes, jumbled interests involving Massachusetts revenue collectors, modern day pirates in the guise of competitive salvage teams and interested scholars, primarily at the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts who were enlisted in the historical archaeology of the Whydah site. This is a fast-paced chapter, understated in drawing these parallels between eighteenth-century sources and twentieth-century incarnates like Barry Clifford. Emblematic of the prose in this section, we get Mr. Clifford's assessment of Captain Southack as "a precise man" whose map, augmented by "state-of-the-art technology developed for military navigation and oil exploration, "all just triangulated. Boom" (pp. 130-31). Perhaps more than any other section, this part of the book seems to date the work and suggests, perhaps, an occasional excuse for writing the narrative in the first place.

Given the original historical context, Vanderbilt's topic, the sinking of the pirate ship Whydah off Provincetown on Cape Cod, had all the makings of a potboiler, neatly melding the New England interest in millennialism, providential trials and tribulations, the pursuit of individual opportunity, the spectacle of public punishment for felons and a good story in the best Anglo-American tradition. Appealing as the modern part of the tale is to readers, one cannot help but long for the presence of someone like the cranky Cotton Mather on the Massachusetts Board of Archaeological Resources, the entity charged with ensuring that the Commonwealth received its share of the pirate's booty.

The book's index is adequate enough for a work of this scope and the list of sources, while betraying quite clearly the original date of publication, is a mixture of popular periodical accounts of Clifford's salvage operation and "classic" (read dated) sources on Phips and

Mather. The book's most serious flaw is that it has no footnotes or specific page references to the works cited. For this reason alone, students of the period will find it exceedingly frustrating to review Vanderbilt's evidence. The absence of citations coupled with the author's predisposition to fictionalize in order to extend and enrich the narrative is one major deficiency I wish the editors at Vanderbilt University Press had rectified. It also would have been opportune to allow (or to ask) Vanderbilt to revise his original Preface, perhaps there his readers would have had the benefit of his further reflection on the Whydah's discovery. Although I am not personally aware of the inventory of artifacts from the Whydah, I am certain that many recovered artifacts have been added to important collections at places such as the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. A listing (even if partial) would make this a more interesting and important contribution.

Although the book left me feeling somewhat undernourished by its scholarly potential and conclusions, I remain convinced that the book needs to be judged on a different basis, as a type of "summer reading" appealing to a college-educated, but not an exclusively scholarly readership. It is indeed rare to come across a book that makes early American material (not to mention a figure like Cotton Mather) a "fun" and even light-hearted encounter. For this reason, above others, *Treasure Wreck* deserves a close look and, perhaps, even a place in a sand-filled knapsack this summer.

Notes:

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[1]. In regard to the importance of Sir William Phips as a exemplum of New England's political, cultural and proto-revolutionary significance see Susan Cherry Bell, *History and Artistry in Cotton Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana*. Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1981; Christopher Felker, *Reinventing Cotton Mather in the American Renaissance*, 1994, especially pages 49-50, 53, 57-63, 75; and Sacvan Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 1975.

[2]. This critical re-evaluation of the Puritan legacy (and of third-generation descendants in particular) has been a vibrant area of study by both literary and historical scholars. The generation that included Cotton Mather had to deal with an especially vexing series of concerns: changes in government, fundamental paradigm shifts in theology, scientific reasoning, law and economics and in a late colonial context, Mather's generation was asked to balance the essentially chaotic notion of a pre-ordained mission based on some hope of common cooperation with the fractious and disorienting realities of the American colonies between 1690 and 1730. The most important of these revisionist studies, particularly in the case of Cotton Mather, is Mitchell Breitweiser's work, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin* (1984).

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