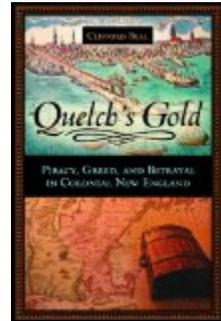


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Clifford Beal. *Quelch's Gold: Piracy, Greed and Betrayal in Colonial New England*. Westport: Praeger, 2007. 272 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-99407-5.

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## The Tale of John Quelch, Privateer or Pirate

In the southern-hemisphere summer of 1703-04, John Quelch commanded the brigantine *Charles* in a series of attacks on Portuguese shipping off the Brazilian coast. The *Charles* had sailed from Marblehead, Massachusetts the previous August, and it returned to its home port with a huge quantity of gold in May, 1704. Soon thereafter Quelch was arrested. He claimed that he had been operating as a legitimate privateer, but there were difficulties with this story. He had a commission from Massachusetts Governor Joseph Dudley, but it was addressed to the ship's original captain. Quelch had taken over the *Charles* only after that man fell ill, became incapacitated, and died under slightly suspicious circumstances. Another problem with the commission was that it authorized the *Charles* to operate only against Spanish and French shipping, with no hint of any action against the Portuguese. But the biggest difficulty stemmed from the alliance that had been formalized between England and Portugal just weeks before Quelch's arrival on the Brazilian coast. The *Charles* had been attacking England's allies, and therefore Quelch was put on trial for his life in what would be the first capital trial conducted by an English admiralty court sitting in North America.

Quelch was tried, convicted, and hanged. During the proceedings and in the immediate aftermath, several questions were raised about the actions of the court. Governor Dudley presided at the trial, and at the start he acknowledged that it might be considered "a severe thing, to put an Englishman to death without a jury" (p. 152.) Admiralty courts did not have juries, and this would be the first capital trial conducted in Mas-

sachusetts in which the defendant could not elect a jury trial. Furthermore, since trials of this sort were a novelty for America, the proper paperwork had not been prepared for them. When the Privy Council learned of Quelch's trial, it scrambled to send the appropriate commissions to Massachusetts, retroactively authorizing the proceedings. Perhaps the most intriguing objection to Quelch's trial is one suggested by a letter that Dudley sent to the Privy Council telling why he felt compelled to publicize and explain the prosecution to the people of Massachusetts. No such trial had ever been held before, he explained, and it seemed "very harsh to hang people that bring in gold to these provinces" (p. 185).

Thus the trial raised various issues—relating to criminal procedure and the right to a jury, the establishment of administrative oversight and formal authorization for the administration of justice in the colonies, and the regulation of violence and depredation in the marginal spaces between the empires—that speak to concerns that have preoccupied historians in the last twenty-to-thirty years. Clifford Beal, however, is not primarily interested in answering or building upon the work of recent scholars. He is not an academic historian, but rather a popular writer and a former editor of *Jane's Defense Weekly*. This is not exactly a historical monograph, but rather (to use Beal's apt, if slightly vague phrase) a work of "historical nonfiction" (p. ix).

The book begins, "Although it was early afternoon, on a hot day in late May, the main taproom of the Noah's Ark in Boston's North End was dim and cool despite the

sun shining through the wavy, paned windows” (p. xi). When I read these words, setting the scene for the story of Quelch’s arrest, I wanted to know how Beal knew what the weather was like. I should not have concerned myself. The scene is entirely conjectural. One hundred pages later I learned that “it is not recorded where Quelch was arrested” (p. 106). *Quelch’s Gold*, from its beginning to its end, is a mix of history and fiction. One entire chapter, an entertaining account of Quelch’s voyage from New England to Brazil, has vivid detail and virtually no documentary support. Beal is honest about this in his notes.

In most passages of the book, Beal hides the speculative nature of his enterprise. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. It makes it possible for him to

write a lively narrative, and indeed the book would have been better if he had left all of the questions surrounding the adequacy of his evidence in the notes. In one instance he chooses the opposite approach. When he introduces Quelch as a character he admits that he has no idea who the man was, and suggests that he might have been born in London or in Marblehead (pp. 17-19). This might have been an effective narrative strategy if the uncertainty surrounding Quelch’s identity had been part of the story as it unfolded, for example, if any of the other characters had wanted to know about Quelch’s personal history. Since none of them do, the mystery adds nothing in the way of drama and leaves the book’s main character blank. That is unfortunate, because the plot of *Quelch’s Gold* is elaborate and the scenery amazing, reminding us of New England’s ties to the wide Atlantic world.

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