

H-Net Reviews

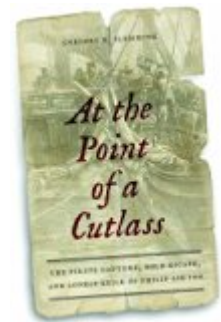
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gregory N. Flemming. *At the Point of a Cutlass: The Pirate Capture, Bold Escape, and Lonely Exile of Philip Ashton*. Lebanon: Foreedge, 2014. 256 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-61168-515-2.

Reviewed by Arad Gigi (Florida State University)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Gregory Fleming's *At the Point of the Cutlass* traces the incredible, suspenseful drama of the life of Philip Ashton, a fisherman from New England who was captured by pirates raiding his crew on the Nova Scotia shore in June 1722. During the following nine months, he traversed the waters of the Atlantic Ocean as the pirates' captive in great misery until he finally managed to escape his imprisoners. To his dismay, however, he escaped to a deserted island—Roatan—off the Honduran coast, and spent there almost an entire year in solitude with almost nothing to wear and no means to hunt and prepare food. But in spite the odds, he survived off the fruits of the land and was eventually found and rescued by a British naval ship, returning at last to New England in 1725. Fleming masterfully reconstructs the story of Ashton while also shedding light on the daily lives of early-modern mariners. Weaving the microhistory of Ashton's ordeal with the macro events of the era, Fleming stitches together a detailed, lucid portrayal of the early decades of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world as a whole. The result is a truly engaging narrative that will receive a warm welcome by general audiences and will prove a useful contribution to undergraduate courses as well.

The days of Ashton's capture were the heyday of the "golden age of piracy," the period running roughly from the 1650s to the 1730s when pirates swarmed the seas and wreaked havoc with the commerce of the empires of the day.[1] As the story goes, Ashton's small fishing-ship crew returned to land on a Friday afternoon to prepare for the weekend break. While in anchorage, pirates led by Edward Low—an infamous pirate captain who was known then and is remembered today for his exceptional brutality—attacked the fishermen. The raiding pirates

were not only interested in seizing consumer goods to enrich themselves, but also in taking captives. Given the harshness of sailing ships in the period—the malnutrition, poor hygiene, prevalence of diseases, backbreaking tasks, and uncompromising climate—able mariners were always in great demand, and pirates were always keen to find men to augment their ever dwindling, ever short-staffed crews. After capturing experienced sailors, the pirates then tried to persuade them to "sign the ship's article," the symbolic gesture to become a full-fledged member of the pirate gang. This is the story of Ashton, a seasoned sailor in his twenties whose skills were coveted by the pirates, but who, according to Fleming, stubbornly refused to sign the articles. For his refusal Ashton suffered torture and maltreatment by Low's men, who tried to coerce him to join their rank.

In March 1723, after some nine months of sailing on board Low's ship throughout the Atlantic Ocean—from New England to the Azores, Cape Verde Islands, off the Guiana coast, the Caribbean and Central American seas—Ashton finally managed to escape, but, to his dismay, he found himself on a deserted island. After struggling to survive for about a year, a group of Baymen—rugged, outlaw woodchoppers—migrated to Roatan to settle their camp there and Ashton joined their lot. Fast-forward a few months, and in another fortuitous set of events, Ashton was rescued by a British naval ships and returned to New England in 1725, some three years after his capture by Low.

The emergence of the early modern Atlantic world seems to have yielded numerous stories like Ashton's—stories of individuals from the lower echelons of society

who by some peculiar chain of events, found themselves cutting across the Atlantic Ocean, taking part in momentous events, and leaving behind an unusual paper trail. In recent years, historians of the emerging field of Atlantic history eagerly followed these paper trails in an attempt to provide a more nuanced account of the early modern Atlantic world, thereby reinvigorating the methods of microhistory.[2] Yet, although Fleming walks in the footsteps of scholarly predecessors, there are important questions to ask about his methodology and the historiographical value of this book, questions that certainly apply to the profession of microhistory more broadly.[3]

The main source Fleming uses to reconstruct Ashton's narrative is a memorial book written and published by the protagonist's pastor following his return to New England. The minister interviewed Ashton a few times in hopes that by publishing the story of Ashton's trial and survival he would do a service to the congregation. Fleming tells us that "Throughout this book, Ashton's narrative is treated for the most part as if it were a journal" (p. 206). I find this methodological choice questionable. This memorial was written months or even years after the events, and not by the protagonist himself, but by his pastor. The latter clearly had different motives in publishing this captivity story than Ashton. Fleming supplements the memorial with ship logs and newspapers, sources that he argues prove the authenticity of the memoir. Still, none of these documents can adequately answer the questions that are at the heart of this book: Did Ashton really defy his captors and refuse to sign the articles despite the sufferings he had endured? Is the story of his time on Roatan genuine or made up? What can we know or infer about Ashton's relationship with the Baymen? These and other questions suggest that the sources Fleming relied on fall short in telling us about Ashton's intentions, motivations, choices, and thoughts.

These are not idle concerns. Whether or not Ashton really refused to join the pirates' crew is an issue of critical importance. Marcus Rediker, the most notable historian working on Golden Age piracy in recent decades, likened pirates to early modern proletariats who came together voluntarily to form unions that opposed the emerging forms of capitalistic exploitation.[4] Thus, Rediker downplays their violence, suggesting that it was only mounted against oppressors such as state agents and harsh ship captains. By doing so, Rediker ignores the part of the story highlighted here by Fleming: pirate ships were loaded with captives who refused, at great peril, to sign the articles and "convert." Therefore, the greatest historiographical contribution of *At the Point of the*

Cutlass lies exactly in putting forward the pirates' captives and their stories while underscoring the pirates' brutality. Yet, I find the book to contain little evidence to support Fleming's proposition that Ashton stood firmly against the pirates. Given that punishments for piracy were extremely harsh in the 1720s, it goes without saying that one would try to hide one's real motives. Unfortunately, Fleming is unable to dispel suspicions concerning Ashton's real motives, thereby leaving the book's foundations unsound and its historiographical contribution debatable.

The criticism I mount against *The Point of the Cutlass* arises from the perspective of the professional historian who reviews it in a scholarly venue. As such, I question the soundness of his source base and methodology to find the work's historiographical value. Yet, in all fairness, Fleming seemingly intends the book to appeal primarily to a general readership and possibly for undergraduate courses. If these are his chief objects, then he surely succeeds. Readers will greatly appreciate this well-written, fast-paced narrative. And Fleming's ability to connect Ashton's ordeal to broader events of the time results in a lucid, engaging portrayal of the early eighteenth-century Atlantic world. For these accomplishments, Fleming deserves praise. Accordingly, many university instructors will find *The Point of the Cutlass* a welcome contribution to their curricula.

Notes

[1]. Marcus Rediker divides this period in three evolving stages: the English buccaneers of 1650-80, the pirates of the 1690s, and finally those of the post-War of Spanish Succession period, "the pirates of 1716-1726, who were the most numerous and successful of the three." Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (London: Verso, 2004), 8-11.

[2]. I refer here to works such as Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: How a Remarkable Woman Crossed Seas and Empires to Become Part of World History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008); Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandarin and the Making of Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and James H. Sweet, *Dominicos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

[3]. Some of these concerns are raised by Jill Lepore,

“Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Micro- 88, no. 1 (Jun., 2001), 129-144.
history and Biography,” *The Journal of American History* [4]. Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*.

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