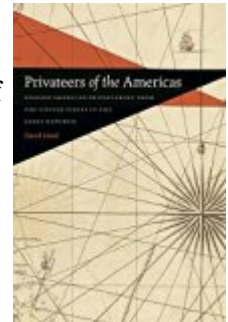


David Head. *Privateers of the Americas: Spanish American Privateering from the United States in the Early Republic.* Early American Places Series. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015. 222 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-4400-3.



Reviewed by Patrick Klinger

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

David Head provides an overview of privateering from the United States to the republics of Spanish America in the early nineteenth century. Analyzing the accounts of privateers found in little used case files of US federal courts, Head argues that it was the geopolitical context (wars and revolutions) of this period that promoted opportunities for privateering and their supporting networks. Privateers became valuable assets in assisting governments in their struggles for independence or for their position within the Atlantic world's balance of power. Head posits that above all, privateering was a business and that privateers manipulated the geopolitical context and loopholes in maritime law for a lucrative illicit trade.

The work's five chapters reconstruct Spanish American privateering from within the United States. The first chapter introduces what Head describes as the geopolitics, or foreign relations, of the early nineteenth-century Atlantic world. The author starts with a discussion of Napoleon plunging the Atlantic world into chaos by deposing

Spanish monarch Fernando VII. With this context, Head argues that privateering emerged (in this period at least) in the Americas. The chapter also explores how the United States' policy of neutrality to the Americas fueled a privateering industry; how Spanish America achieved independence; and how people within the United States warmly received the newly formed Spanish American governments, despite official government neutrality.

Chapters 2 through 4 focus on well-known ports of Spanish American privateers and explore their financial and smuggling networks. Chapter 2 studies New Orleans and the coastal region of Barataria. In the case of southern Louisiana, geography, terrain, and politics aided smuggling and privateering. Swamps, rivers, bays, bayous, and marshes provided natural protection from custom agents, as did the position of southern Louisiana between two parts of the Spanish Empire, which created a jurisdictional nightmare. Head utilizes a less-emphasized perspective of familiar figures from the Battle of New Orleans, such as Pierre

and Jean Laffite, to highlight the development of Spanish American privateering in this area after 1815. The Laffites exemplified the success of privateers and smugglers in this region because of their ability to understand and manipulate the geopolitical tensions of the period. Chapter 3 studies the local privateer network within Baltimore, Maryland, which Head describes as more business-like with a network of local investors. Although geopolitics were as important in Baltimore as in southern Louisiana, privateering itself differed. Privateers departing from the Chesapeake employed larger ships, which sailed further for prizes. Because of this, they required greater capital but yielded greater returns. Head delves into the financial system of Baltimore and provides a brief study of the select few able to fund privateers. Chapter 4 explores privateering from Galveston, Texas, and Amelia Island off the eastern coast of Florida. These examples differ from the previous two locations because they were outside of the United States' control and could issue their own commissions, which made trading their prize goods *more* legal. Privateering still had the same goals in these places—capture Spanish vessels and sell the prizes—but Head argues that geopolitics played an even larger role in these two examples. Occupiers of each island, often with ties to the United States, claimed they represented the authority of Spanish American governments. This only complicated the already delicate relations between Spain and the United States and the ongoing work for the future Transcontinental Treaty of 1819.

The last chapter examines the larger network of privateers and prominent crew members. The author projects the experiences of the work's notable individuals onto the broader themes concerning privateers in this period. With this approach, Head challenges the idea that these privateers from the Americas were entirely disreputable, influenced by early ideas of a manifest destiny, or even cosmopolitans against the idea of a nation-state. Instead, Head argues that priva-

teers sailed for profit and pride, and that some even believed in the ideals of Spanish American independence, which seemingly does not fully discredit these other perspectives.

Head effectively explores the world of privateers in the early American Republic and illustrates how the complicated geopolitical context in the Americas, at least between 1808 and 1820, promoted privateering. While Head expands the context surrounding the three studies of privateering ports, his additional goal of placing this work within the larger context of the Atlantic in the age of revolution is not as fully developed. For instance, in the section on Baltimore and within the work more broadly, the limited emphasis on the importance or the influence of the War of 1812 for future privateers in the Americas is somewhat puzzling. This work would pair well with J. R. McNeill's *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (2010) or Sherry Johnson's *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution* (2011), which provide a fuller context of the period, for an undergraduate reader or for any audience. Nonetheless, the work is clearly written with a narrative that is easily followed throughout, which makes it approachable for scholars and those with a general interest in the subject. It is an enjoyable read on a topic that is understudied in privateering history and the history of the early American Republic.

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