



David Wilson. *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.* Melton: Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated, 2021. 288 pp. \$130.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-595-3.

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Golden-Age Piracy's Swan Song?

As bloodthirsty marauders or anti-capitalist rebels, pirates have been both romanticized and vilified for their exploits in the Atlantic world during their early eighteenth-century golden age. Buccaneers have endured in the form of mascots, movie characters, and toys because they continue to resonate as cultural symbols of resistance to authority. This ubiquity, however, belies the existential threat these villains of all nations posed to the European powers that turned the Caribbean and beyond into arenas for imperial competition. Much has been made of the extent to which anti-piracy efforts on the part of these European states consolidated imperial power in the far reaches of the Atlantic world. In *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*, historian David Wilson offers a novel and intriguing explanation of the nature of the relationship between anti-piracy efforts and British imperial power.

In short, Wilson argues that the fight against piracy in the early eighteenth century was not a state-led project emanating from London. Instead, it was an ad hoc process instigated by a myriad of different imperial actors ranging from merchants

and planters to colonial leaders and ship owners. Fish, sugar, slave, and tobacco merchants emerged as particularly proactive in opposing outlaws. Piracy threatened the stability and profitability of colonial enterprises, and thus these groups had a vested interest in curtailing piratical activity.

They had much to lose. The British state simply did not have the resources, capacity, or will to pursue a coherent and effective campaign against pirates in waters as far-flung as the Caribbean Sea, the North Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean. Focusing on numerous anti-piracy campaigns from 1716 to 1726, Wilson concludes, “It was these interest groups—whether merchants, shipowners, investors, officeholders, or planters—rather than the British crown, Parliament, or Admiralty that encouraged, organised and often undertook the anti-piracy campaigns that collectively stimulated a decline in Atlantic piracy in the early eighteenth century” (p. 3).

Wilson characterizes efforts to suppress piracy in the British Empire as fragmented, haphazard, and pragmatic, responding to events as they happened with resources available rather than guided by an overarching policy. In Wilson’s telling, the decline of piracy in the early eight-

eenth century is a story best told from the bottom up, whereas historians have previously told it from the top down. Previous historians like Marcus Rediker and Mark G. Hanna have used naval expeditions and mass public executions as proof that the British state carried out a “war against piracy” from 1716 to 1726 that aimed to protect commercial interest and consolidate imperial authority. “This was simply,” Wilson counters, “not a reality in this period” (pp. 2–3).

As Wilson convincingly argues, this kind of organized effort on the part of the British state to end the piratical threat would have been impossible given the limitations of the British navy and the nature of the British Empire in the early eighteenth century. Traditional explanations focusing on Britain’s “war against piracy” present the Royal Navy as more powerful and more widespread than it actually was. While growing significantly across the seventeenth century, the navy was unable to establish much of a sustained presence in colonial waters. During this period of near-constant warfare between the powers of Europe, Britain could ill afford to devote many ships to the costly and laborious task of hunting down pirates in extra-European waters. Furthermore, the geography and administrative structure of the British Empire hampered any kind of organized, widespread action. Wilson notes this connection, writing that “the apparatus for such a campaign simply did not exist in an empire comprised of distant semi-autonomous communities and settlements that were separated by vast ungovernable and erratically policed oceanic and coastal expanses” (p. 22). Wilson’s book is organized geographically. The first three chapters track anti-piracy efforts in the Caribbean before expanding to other areas in the British Empire. Wilson devotes a chapter each to North America, West Africa, and the Indian Ocean.

The uptick in piratical activity in the aftermath of the War of Spanish Succession (1702–13) initially centered on the island of Jamaica. Instead

of merely a continuation of the imperial rivalry between Great Britain and Spain during peacetime, Wilson characterizes the rise in piracy during the early eighteenth century as an unforeseen byproduct of a series of local disputes over issues like smuggling, logwood cutting, and maritime salvaging. These disputes were exacerbated by legal ambiguities and the inability of any one actor to effectively control maritime spaces beyond colonial ports. Initial responses to the growing threat of piracy were fragmented and initiated by naval captains and colonial administrators, but only in waters near their posts. Before 1718, Wilson notes, piracy was largely unopposed in the Caribbean.

Soon, however, the influential merchants affected by maritime predation began pushing for a more active response. As Wilson notes, “the imperial administration only began to gradually respond to pirates ... after England-based mercantile groups complained about the impact of piracy on British transatlantic shipping” (p. 61). Even with greater attention from the metropole, anti-piracy efforts remained disorganized. With resources spread thin, the Royal Navy could not afford to send many warships to Caribbean waters to sustain anti-piracy campaigns, meaning such campaigns were led by colonial agents using private resources. Wilson highlights Woodes Rogers’s efforts to suppress piracy from his base in New Providence to demonstrate the central role of private interests in these endeavors.

A similar story played out in North American waters. From capes and inlets on the coasts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and even as far north as Newfoundland, pirates harassed colonial shipping. In response, colonial governments and private interests organized small-scale operations to stymie piratical activity. Perhaps the most significant difference, Wilson argues, between North American efforts and Caribbean efforts to suppress piracy is that North American colonies received even less consideration

from London, requiring North American colonies to be even more proactive to provide their own defense.

By 1721, North American efforts proved successful enough that pirates resorted to waters marginal to the British Empire along the west coast of Africa and in the Indian Ocean. The most significant triumph of the Royal Navy over pirates during this era came off Cape Lopez in modern-day Gabon when Bartholomew “Black Bart” Roberts was defeated and killed in 1722. Wilson argues that the British slave trade lobby was instrumental in orchestrating this dramatic victory. After all, their calls for greater naval protection to defend their inhumane traffic from predation brought warships to West Africa in the first place. Unlike in the Caribbean and North America, the Royal Navy would be a constant fixture in West African waters even after the threat of piracy declined. Wilson then turns his attention to the Indian Ocean, where the British East India Company’s lobbying efforts culminated with the 1721 dispatching of a Royal Navy squadron that was, as Wilson notes, “the most substantial naval force to be assigned with the specific directive to suppress pirates” (p. 175). The fact that this squadron was assigned to the Indian Ocean even before any reports surfaced of piracy in the region attested to the power of the British East Indian Company as a mercantile entity.

After 1722 piracy in the British Atlantic declined significantly. The piecemeal effort of colonial actors and the Royal Navy drove pirates to the fringes of the empire. As pirates resorted to new waters their activities became more difficult and less remunerative to sustain. While piracy was never eradicated from the British Empire, it was, by 1726, a significantly smaller problem than it had been just a decade before. Anti-piracy efforts on the part of actors throughout the British Empire exposed what Wilson calls “the structural weakness of piracy,” as “pirates found it increasingly difficult to recruit crewmembers, operate

unopposed in vulnerable chokepoints for any length of time and locate ready markets for their plunder in exchange for supplies and provisions. These inherent structural weaknesses meant that piracy became less profitable and less attractive” (p. 207). A minor shortcoming in Wilson’s work is a tendency to treat pirates as a monolithic group. Certainly the profit motive drove most if not all piratical activity, but the book does not tease out other motivations or how they changed over time and place as piracy shifted from the Caribbean to North America, West Africa, and the Indian Ocean. This elision is, however, understandable given Wilson’s goal of understanding the actors, decision, and forces that were largely outside the world of pirates.

Wilson does well in demonstrating the degree to which the anti-piracy efforts of the early eighteenth century emanated from interest groups outside of London and that campaigns were largely carried out by colonial ships, not Royal Navy warships. This conclusion adds greater nuance to our understanding of the relationship between piracy, the state, and imperial commerce in the British Atlantic. Wilson’s work makes a persuasive case for reconsidering how power operated in the British Empire and the extent to which imperial processes were influenced by centralized decision makers or on-the-ground actors. This book will find a welcome home among scholars of piracy, British maritime history, and the Atlantic world.

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