

Review essay

Tudor Pickory and Plunder on the High Seas

John C. Appleby. *Under the Bloody Flag: Pirates of the Tudor Age*. Stroud, UK: The History Press, www.thehistorypress.co.uk, 2009. 288 pp, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. UK £20, hardback; ISBN 978-0-7524-4851-0.

Long before Blackbeard preyed on ships in the Caribbean, the waters of the British Isles were infested with pirates. Especially in times of peace, when letters of reprisal or of marque were few, the seaman took matters of employment into his own calloused hands. Even the captain on a trading voyage would not disdain a bit of pickory to sweeten things by seizing a prize or two while on the high seas. In short, it was business, and the Crown frequently turned a blind eye to enterprising mariners, especially when the prey might be a rich Spanish galleon.

Sir Francis Drake was arguably the most famous pirate—or patriot—in the Tudor period, 1485-1603, but there were many others who operated first in European, then Caribbean waters and the Pacific. Despite all the famous names, the unknown infamous are also part of the story told by John Appleby in *Under the Bloody Flag: Pirates of the Tudor Age*. There was Henry Strangeways, who attacked French shipping in the Channel and in the Irish Sea, and Robert Hicks, who took on French, Spanish, Danish and Scottish shipping. Others first gained notoriety then plundered their way to a knighthood, such as Sir Martin Frobisher, Sir John Hawkyns, and Sir Francis Drake, honoured for their breach of the law in England, if vilified in Spain. The profligate patriot George Clifford, Third Earl of Cumberland, sallied forth on twelve voyages of depredation to the European coasts, to the Azores, and to the Caribbean, vainly hoping to recoup his family's squandered fortunes. Those who went off soundings went in heavily-armed vessels to the Azores, and on to the Caribbean, to the Spanish Main, to Brazil, Peru, Panamá, and Nueva España, mainly for booty. Such voyages, profitable or otherwise, challenged Spanish hegemony in the New World.

Appleby, in *Bloody Flag*, might well argue further that the proving ground for the English victory over the Invincible Armada in the Channel in 1588 was not won in the coastal waters of Britain, but in the Azores and Caribbean. It was there that the mettle of the crews was drawn and tempered, and the metal of their cannon was thoroughly heated red hot, from Tierra del Fuego to the jungle waters off Panamá. This book spans the Tudors, 1485-1603, with more weight rightly given to the latter years. Still, it would have been finer to treat English merchant vessels sailing the Caribbean by 1520, where they were greeted as corsairs and heretics by Spanish cannon.

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One might ask Appleby, was the recent schism of Protestant versus Catholic, so much a part of politics and business after the 1530s, a part of the pirate's life at sea? It certainly was for the arch-pirate, Drake, who was fervent on the importance of daily services at sea, preaching the passion according to Protestant beliefs. His chaplain, Philip Nichols, was later named to the committee that produced the Authorised Bible. The Spanish condemned all English as Lutheran heretics, damned souls not to be trusted, as English castaways from Mexico to the Spanish Main found out, especially after the Inquisition came to the New World in the 1570s. This subject, despite Louis B. Wright's *God, Glory, and the Gospel*, is the stuff of another book yet to be written, perhaps called 'Blood and Wine, Skull and Crossbones'.

Appleby writes about four big heists from the second half of the sixteenth century. Was it piracy or was it Crown policy? Or both? Off the Pacific coast of Panamá in 1577, Captain John Oxnam took two barques and 160,000 pesos of gold and silver, the wealthiest prize to that date. In 1579, off Peru, Francis Drake seized the *Cacafuego* and her treasure of over 447,000 pesos. In 1587, off Cabo San Lucas, Thomas Cavendish, following Drake's wake around the world with his own circumnavigation, plundered the galleon *Santa Ana* and her cargo of 122,000 gold pesos. A fourth celebrated prize of the period, taken off the Azores in 1592 by Cumberland's ships and others, was the Portuguese carrack, *Madre de Dios*, and her huge booty of nearly £500,000. Though Appleby's book records these spectacular piracies, most of his book is devoted to the smaller fish, and to hulls filled with hides, dyes, sugar, and pearls. For most pirates, theirs was a simple matter of plundering the business of others.

Appleby has drawn on the research of Kenneth Andrews, David Loades, D. B. Quinn, N.A.M. Rodger, Peter Earle, and Marcus Rediker. Following such fine exemplars, Appleby is heavy on the statistics and documentation, scholarly, in a style that smacks especially of David Loades, durable, dry as sea biscuit after a long voyage, and coloured by Rediker's proletarian eye for the tar before the mast.

Even a good book worth its salt provides a bone or two to chew on. For example, many of the illustrations are not from the Tudor period but from later centuries. Indeed, some are seaside photos from the twentieth century. Appleby might have set Tudor pirate vessels in the context of armed merchant vessels plying their trade and sometimes trading cannon fire with a Spanish fort. The waters are muddied further in time of war. The Crown commonly requisitioned all vessels to her defense, merchant and pirate, to augment the Royal Navy. Larger vessels, both merchant and naval—galleons, frigates and the like—were essentially all the same design and normally, both were armed, a lesson the Portuguese *caravelas* had learned earlier. Appleby rightly stresses that pirates sought profit before duty to country (Drake was so accused in August 1588 for leaving station to seek a Spanish prize). Again, muddy waters.

The meshings of trade, piracy, and dominion (both secular and sacred) grew more complex during the century. The Tudor age saw Sir John Hawkyns as the first Englishman to trade in slaves, in the 1560s. When the Spanish denied him license to trade, he traded surreptitiously. Such practice led to warfare. Appleby rightly pegs 1568, when the Spanish slaughtered Hawkyns' fleet moored at San Juan de Ulúa, as a pivotal

year. Only Hawkyns, his young relative, Francis Drake, and two ships, overcrowded with desperate crew, escaped to tell the tale. To the Spanish, Hawkyns and his lot were all Protestant heretics and pirates, short and simple. The 1570s thus found *El Draque* exacting revenge for the infamy of 1568 in numerous raids year after year in the Caribbean.

Given those events, one might question Appleby's finding significance in a decline in piracy in the mid-1570s because men-of-war were manned by English recruits. There were fewer raids then than in the 1580s and 1590s, but they were the first such depredations and were effective for both purse and politics; witness John Oxnam and Francis Drake's depredations throughout the earlier period in both the Caribbean and Pacific. The 1570s was an important decade, and well might have seen the Cross of St George flying over an English colony in the tropics. It was English corsairs who led the way. Whitehall, however, was more cautious, and did not follow their lead until it was too late. By the end of the 1590s, the chance was lost. Appleby comments that the English pirates worked closely with Huguenot raiders, but Anglo-French piratical co-operation was not common, since pirates generally worked alone. As for the French, their corsairs were the first to terrorize the Caribbean. Guillaume le Têtu's short-lived alliance with Drake (the old Frenchman was killed in raiding Panamá) was a rare exception of co-operation. Appleby gives Cimaroon help in Panamá greater weight than perhaps it deserves. Yes, these runaway Blacks regarded the English as saviours against the Spanish who had enslaved them, just as the Indians in Guiana later saw Raleigh as the answer to Caribe and Spanish aggression. Both groups became disillusioned when English promises were not kept. In the mountains of Panamá's Vallano region, the *entente cordial* lasted only some six years, 1572-78, and was largely restricted to the actions of Oxnam and Drake. Soon after, the Spanish were relieved to have 'pacified' the rebellious Cimaroons. It is true that in the 1560s Elizabeth gave audience to the Huguenot Jean Ribault and there was backing for an Anglo-French colony in Florida.

What, if not the French or the Cimaroons, made the English pirates successful? Most voyages did not result in prizes, and those that took undue risks, decidedly not. Only when a heavily-armed pirate ship or two had clearly superior force, surprise, the windward gauge on a weaker prey, or only when they could surprise a poorly defended port and catch its citizens sleeping could pirates hope to fill their hold. Coffers laden with gold or silver were rare. Such tactics, Appleby might have argued further, practised by mariners marauding beyond the pale of law, were much later made policy for the Royal Navy and the Marines.

Appleby rightly notes that voyages of reprisal were an exercise of national sea power at little cost to an ageing Queen strapped for cash. Between 1589 and 1591, there were as many as 100 such voyages, as Andrews has noted, underwritten mostly by syndicates of London merchants. In the year 1598 alone, 80 voyages of depredation were recorded, though Appleby notes that the evidence for these is "patchy." Caribbean waters were the prime hunting ground, but sailing there was expensive and more perilous than staying closer to home. Two voyages, in 1585 and 1595, were sanctioned by the Crown, and even in these, plunder pre-empted politics thanks to Drake in both cases. To sign on

for such enterprises the desperate seaman was driven to trade poor harvests, inflation, and no jobs at home for the uncertainties of the sea. Still, there was a chance to strike it rich. The greatest hauls came from the Azores, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Appleby concludes by spiking the common idea that the Tudor period was a prelude to the “golden age of piracy,” 1650-1720. It was not. It was its own time, and it would be a Virgilian fallacy, *post hoc*, to see the former as prelude to the latter, as Appleby shrewdly notes.

Appleby has written a fine book, well-researched and documented. It is a book that the scholar will keep on his shelf, and consult with confidence. It would (admittedly) be tougher going for the readers stultified in airport lounges or train stations. Appleby's strength is in analysis, not story. That said, *Bloody Flag's* research makes for a solid new contribution in finding those unrecognised ciphers, those fustian tars who sailed under the bloody flag, so often neglected by historians more dazzled by velvet and gold braid on the quarter deck.

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(See also: J. S. Dean. *Tropics Bound: Elizabeth's Seadogs on the Spanish Main*. Stroud, UK: The History Press, forthcoming, Autumn 2010)

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