

*Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age.* By MARCUS REDIKER. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. 256 pages. \$24.00 (cloth), \$16.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Simon P. Newman, *University of Glasgow*

Pirates have fascinated Marcus Rediker for more than a quarter century, and since the publication of “Under the Banner of King Death,” he has returned regularly to these “gentlemen of fortune.”<sup>1</sup> Building on three decades of research, this deeply researched work focuses principally on a single decade. Rediker first sketches the longer history of the buccaneers of 1650–80, many of whom had served as agents of states at war before transforming into the pirates of the 1690s. By the early years of the eighteenth century, European and New World governments “had taken a harsh new view of pirates as the enemies of imperial designs rather than as allies who might help to accomplish them” (24). Nevertheless, the period of 1716–26 was a golden age of pirates “who attacked the ships of all nations and created a crisis in the lucrative Atlantic system of trade” (9). Rediker estimates that as many as two thousand pirates sailed at the beginning of this era, a number that would double before declining to a few hundred after a bloody war of attrition. Early-eighteenth-century governments were horrified when the “common men of the deep gained control of piracy and used it for their own purposes. . . . By 1720 the main purpose was no longer booty, but rather, the perpetuation of a ‘life of liberty’” (36–37).

The causes, nature, and results of common sailors’ struggle for their life of liberty are at the heart of this book. Rediker’s earlier work has illustrated the brutality of life at sea and the horrific violence employed to control seafarers, but here he focuses on the decisions and actions of those whose resentment turned to rebellion. Some became pirates through mutiny against harsh and unfair captains and masters, whereas others voluntarily deserted when their ships were captured. Pirates generally sought only willing volunteers, though on occasion they impressed skilled men, especially as pirate crews dwindled in the early 1720s. Though many seafarers may have yearned to rid themselves of naval discipline and deprivation, perhaps fear, desperation, and even hunger may have triggered the desertion of sailors who had not planned to become pirates.

Rediker presents pirates as transcending nationality, a condition best symbolized by their “antinationals” (8) skull and crossbones flags. Black flags had long signaled that no quarter would be given or that a criminal was being executed, and the skull and crossbones in captains’ logs “were one of the few lasting marks of the common sailor who died at sea” (167). The flag’s promise of death and terror, combined with pirates’ readiness to accept their own bloody fate, are two of Rediker’s themes. Most pirates were British, which raises questions about piracy as a British rather than an Atlantic phenomenon. Rediker is surely correct in presenting pirates as men and occasionally women who had chosen to renounce nationality, yet it seems likely that the size and working conditions of Britain’s merchant and royal navies meant that those who served on British ships were not only more numerous but also far more likely to experience the harsh discipline of the world’s largest and most efficient system for the transportation of raw materials and manufactured goods. It is more than coincidence that the most advanced mercantile capitalist nation on earth produced the majority of early-eighteenth-century pirates, and that most pirates who renounced nationality were rejecting Britain.

Pirates embraced the opportunity to abandon an oppressive and iniquitous working world in favor of one based on justice and equality. By demonstrating a striking uniformity of rules and

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Rediker, “‘Under the Banner of King Death’: The Social World of Anglo-American Pirates, 1716 to 1726,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 38, no. 2 (April 1981): 203–27; Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (1881; repr., New York, 1999), 58 (quotation).

customs among golden age pirates, Rediker makes a compelling case for the existence of this alternative social order. Many pirates used the word revenge when renaming their ships, and whenever they captured another vessel pirates began by investigating the character of those with authority over common sailors. When crewmembers or pirates with past knowledge of a captured captain and his officers spoke well of them, captives could expect humane treatment and perhaps even compensation for their losses. The other face of what contemporaries knew as Jamaica discipline meant that captains and masters who had mistreated their crews were made to suffer. Such standardized behavior among the pirates supports Rediker's claim that the "search for vengeance was in many ways a fierce, embittered response to the violent, personal, and arbitrary authority wielded by the merchant captain" (87). He is less convincing, however, in seeming to defend the violence enacted by pirates, suggesting that it only "shows how they could not escape the system of which they were a part" (89).

The relatively egalitarian and even democratic system of government fashioned by pirates has long been featured in popular representations of this era. Rediker's larger objective is to demonstrate that this piratical system of government represented an alternative to the rule of law being codified in the emergent nation-states of Europe. Pirates were frightening to many of their contemporaries not simply because they were outlaws, but rather because they had created an alternative legal and social system, one that overturned social, political, and economic hierarchies.

Imperial authorities were not slow to act against such a challenge. Rediker describes a successful campaign to eradicate pirates and a propaganda war designed to cast them as "the antithesis of the Christian way of life" (132). The latter was far from successful, at least in the long term: though *Treasure Island's* Jim Hawkins shuddered at pirate tales "of the wickedest men that God ever allowed upon the sea," tales that "frightened people worst of all," he nonetheless admitted that these stories supplied the "fine excitement in a quiet country life," and Stevenson's novel remains as popular for its pirates as for its tale of law and order triumphant.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps pirates retained their popularity as much for the way they bravely faced punishment and death as for the world they had sought to make. Rediker's final chapter, "Defiance of Death Itself," is powerfully evocative. He paints a colorful picture of men who knew that their time was limited and that they would likely die violent and unpleasant deaths. Yet in their language, culture, and actions, many pirates embraced their fate. Riotous living was matched by a cheerful, profane, and blasphemous embrace of death: some delighted in taunting clerics charged with obtaining gallows confessions, brazenly announcing their willingness to go to the devil. Rediker's hilarious account of mock trials conducted by the crew of the *Thomas Anstis* on a small island off the coast of Cuba shows men who laughed at a system that they knew would kill them (155–61). And kill them it did.

The real pirates of the early eighteenth century were a far cry from W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's "Pirates of Penzance," who turned out to be youthful noblemen willing to reject piracy when called to give allegiance to the British monarch. The pirates of the golden age were impoverished men who forever rejected monarch and nation to live, work, and die under a different flag and, indeed, embrace a different worldview. Rediker's is a book in the tradition of Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*, in that it brings alive not only the characters who sought to rebel against authority in times long past but also the brave new worlds they dared to imagine.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, 5–6.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1972).