

Digital Sources and Newer Approaches in the Study of Historical Piracy

Joseph Gibbs

Introduction

While pirate themes today proliferate in films, toys, video games, cruises, mass-market books and the like, the subject has also attracted a growing number of scholarly works and well-documented mainstream titles. Some of this may be an echoing of – or a reaction to – what the entertainment industries have disseminated. But other factors are helping spur interest in historical piracy (and related topics such as privateering) as an area of study and publication.

One among them is digital technology, which has improved access to previously hard-to-find primary and secondary sources. Another is the continued rise of newer, often-interdisciplinary approaches to the subject, introducing new perspectives and linking the topic to an ever-growing range of factors. Together they encourage research and invite contributions from a variety of perspectives and academic fields.

Digital Data

In the study of historical piracy, where older texts are key, digital scanning technology has vastly increased the number of sources (such as books, newspapers, monographs, etc.) that can be shared, read, collated, and searched. Some historians now carry tablet devices crammed with .pdf files of complete, hitherto hard-to-find works printed before 1923 (hence in the public domain), usually available for free download from services such as Google Books.¹ Large microfilm collections of early English and American books and newspapers have also been ported into searchable online databases, such as those by Readex, Gale Group, Newsbank, ProQuest, the British Library and others; a cursory search of one university library's holdings turned up almost two dozen such databases relevant to the 1600s-1800s.²

Digital technologies have conveyed other benefits. The contents of some “old media” books that reproduce rare source documents on American and European piracy, such as Joel H. Baer's four-volume *British Piracy in the Golden Age*³ – entered the publishing world as high-resolution images that were then digitally “cleaned” to improve legibility.⁴ And scholars have also been taking advantage of the enhanced reproduction services of government archives and university libraries. These can usually quickly provide scans of their holdings that are in analog form – such as print or microfilm – for a nominal fee. The ordering process and the delivery of digital files can often be done online.⁵

“New-Old” Sources

In making it easier to gather sources, digital technology may also be helping adjust the status of some standard works. One of these, on which histories of American and European piracy long relied heavily, is *The General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*. Still a classic read, it was first published in 1724 by a still-mysterious figure named Captain Charles Johnson – Daniel Defoe has been among those suggested as the book's real

author.⁶ In 1972, it underwent a rigorous analysis by Manuel Schonhorn, who showed that a writer's license was indeed at work on some of its contents. In so doing, he tracked down some of its author's evident contemporary sources, such as original newspaper accounts, monographs, trial transcripts, and other texts.⁷



Edward Teach (left) and Bartholomew Roberts (right), two of the pirates chronicled in the influential *General History* (18th century, artist unknown).

Though such efforts helped alert scholars to these sources, the latter were hard to come by in the analog era, and the *General History*'s standing as the main body of evidence on its subject has been slow to diminish.⁸ But the digital technologies mentioned above have helped make texts such as those Schonhorn identified in 1972 more easily accessible or obtainable. Correspondingly, maritime historians now may rely significantly less on the *General History* than did their predecessors.

New Approaches and Perspectives

Schonhorn's analysis of the *General History* was part of the modern movement toward critical, primary-source conscious scholarship on historical piracy and maritime studies in general. Entries in this vast, ever-expanding library have been increasingly diverse in approach, reflecting broadening geographical interests, and including viewpoints rooted in areas such as (among others) politics and philosophy. Their often-interdisciplinary nature has brought in methodologies, criteria, and interpretative perspectives from a variety of disciplines, and encouraged input from a widening pool of contributors.⁹

Many works also moved away from the often biographical, personality-driven approaches of the past. Historian Marcus Rediker, for example, has approached nautical topics mainly as collective rather than individual undertakings. His research has linked subjects such as piracy and its causes to conditions at sea and on land, and to issues such as class, gender, and racial consciousness. In doing so, he has cited influences from fields such as "linguistics, sociology, economics, anthropology, and especially ethnography." He wrote in one book that:

The interdisciplinary approach proceeds from the belief that the history of seafaring people can and must be more than a chronicle of admirals, captains, and military battles at sea: It must be made to speak to larger historical problems and processes. The seaman's international life and labor require an international history, linking the pasts of Britain and America to broad intercultural histories of continental Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, and the East and West Indies. ...¹⁰

Similar consciousness – though certainly not agreement on interpretation – has been increasingly at work in studies of historical piracy. And as more academic disciplines have become represented in the area, the geographical scope has ever-widened, and more diverse perspectives have been brought to the topic. The current English-language bibliography is far too large to try to survey here, but the 1980s and 1990s, for example, saw books and journal articles start to appear on topics such as piracy and male sexuality;¹¹ female pirates;¹² and black pirates and sailors.¹³ Some recent books have addressed historical piracy through specialized prisms such as naval/military tactics and economics.¹⁴ And while “traditional” pirate biographies still exist, they incorporate far broader subject materials and sources than did many earlier ones.¹⁵ The same can be said of recent general histories of piracy aimed at mainstream readers.¹⁶

Cautions and Conclusion

While digital media and the emergence of newer academic approaches complement each other, and have had positive effects on historical piracy studies, there are caveats to acknowledge. One regarding digital technology is that a hitherto obscure source’s modern re-appearance in digital form does not automatically lend it credibility. And even well into the digital era, not all university libraries have access to relevant databases; some classic maritime history titles have been slow to become digitally available; and some digital reproductions lack legibility.¹⁷

Additionally, while scanned documents seem today to be in a stable, well-established format, it may be prudent to note that any program meant to store and retrieve data can quickly become obsolete, especially after a few system upgrades. The pace of technology change may have already imperiled some earlier efforts at translating maritime historical data into spreadsheets and other databases.¹⁸

Regarding newer approaches to and perspectives on piracy, it is obligatory to note that all scholarship operating at long historical range needs special care. Many studies tend, naturally, to reflect contemporary interests and interpretation; if historical context is lost, complex realities may be obscured. Nevertheless, the developments cited above continue to help infuse studies of historical piracy, and other maritime subjects, with new possibilities regarding sources, perspectives, and ultimately, contributors.

Notes

- ¹ Correspondence with Dr. Rodney Carlisle, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University, Feb. 11, 2013.
- ² Correspondence with Daphne Flanagan, Librarian of the American University of Sharjah, June 9, 2013.
- ³ London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007.
- ⁴ Correspondence with James Powell, Pickering and Chatto Publishers, May 22, 2013.
- ⁵ Correspondence with Dr. Richard Burg, Arizona State University, June 8, 2013.
- ⁶ For a recent work on the disputed authorship of the *General History*, see Arne Bialuschewski, "Daniel Defoe, Nathaniel Mist, and the *General History of the Pyrates*," in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 98 (2004), 21-38.
- ⁷ Manuel Schonhorn, ed., *A General History of the Pyrates* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999 [reprint of work originally published in 1972]). See esp. xxxiii-xl, and endnotes.
- ⁸ The modern maritime historian C.R. Pennell placed the *General History* alongside another enduring classic, Alexander Exquemelin's *Buccaneers of America*, as books which "for all their shortcomings as history, have provided so much of the evidence for studies of piracy that it is hard to shake ourselves free of their influence." From "Brought to Book: Reading about Pirates," the introduction to Pennell, ed., *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 5.
- ⁹ For a comprehensive survey circa 2001 of academic studies of historical piracy (an area which, in English at least, is more than a century old) see Pennell, "Brought to Book," in Pennell, ed., *Bandits at Sea*, 3-24. This anthology of international works reprints several of the examples of 1980s/1990s scholarship cited below.
- ¹⁰ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seaman, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4-5, 7. See also his *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon, 2004), and *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007).
- ¹¹ Examples include B.R Burg, *Sodomy and the Perception of Evil: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean* (New York: New York University Press, 1983); Dian Murray, "The Practice of Homosexuality among the Pirates of Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century China," *International Journal of Maritime History* 4:1 (1992) 121-130; and Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality, and Masculine Identity* (New York: New York University, 1999).
- ¹² Examples include Dian Murray, "One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates," in R.W. Guisso and S. Johannesen, eds., *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship* (Youngstown, NY: Philo Press, 1981), 147-161; John C. Appleby, "Women and Piracy in Ireland: From Gráinne O'Malley to Anne Bonny," in Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd, eds., *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 53-68; Wendy Bracewell, "Women among the Uskoks: Literary Images and Reality," *MOST* (Zagreb) 2, 1988, 44-51; and Jo Stanley, ed., *Bold in Her Breeches: Women Pirates Across the Ages* (London: Pandora, 1996).
- ¹³ Examples include W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Kenneth J. Kinkor, "Black Men Under the Black Flag," in Pennell, ed., *Bandits at Sea*, 195-210.
- ¹⁴ Such as Benerson Little, *The Sea Rover's Practice: Pirate Tactics and Techniques, 1630-1730* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2007); and Peter T. Leeson, *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- ¹⁵ Examples include Robert C. Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Richard Zacks, *Pirate Hunter: The True Story of Captain Kidd* (New York: Hyperion, 2002); Angus Konstam, *Blackbeard: America's Most Notorious Pirate* (New York: Wiley, 2007); Colin Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates: Being the True and Surprising Story of the Caribbean Pirates and the Man Who Brought Them Down* (New York: Harvest, 2007); and Stephan Talty, *Empire of Blue Water: Captain Morgan's Great Pirate Army, the Epic Battle for the Americas, and the Catastrophe That Ended the Outlaws' Bloody Reign* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2007).
- ¹⁶ Examples include Angus Konstam, *Piracy: The Complete History* (London: Osprey, 2008); and David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: Romance and Reality of Life Among the Pirates* (New York: Random House, 2006)
- ¹⁷ See Kathryn Stasio, "A War of Words: Privateers, Pirates, and a Professor's Attempt to Enter the Fray; or, Wandering in the Desert in the Land of Profusion," in Kevin L. Cope and Robert C. Leitz III, eds., *Textual Studies and the Enlarged Eighteenth Century: Precision as Profusion* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 103-116. See also C. Douglas Maginley, "Caveat Emptor," a review of a book created through OCR (optical character recognition) technology, in *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord*, XXI:1 (January 2011), 71-72.
- ¹⁸ John Frayler, retired historian at the Salem (Massachusetts) Maritime National Historic Site notes: "Unless you have software compatible to the system then in use, the information becomes as inaccessible as it was before the projects began. I suspect this will eventually be a problem as systems update and no one remembers to transfer the data. That should be a concern to all of us who attempt to preserve historical research." Correspondence, June 15, 2013.