

The Real Pirates of the Caribbean

The eponymous pirates in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, it is discovered at the end of the original version, are outcast or disenfranchised nobility living in the time of Queen Victoria. Gilbert and Sullivan used anachronism in this case to make a satirical point about the superficial and seemingly arbitrary nature of the aristocracy in Victorian England; history points to the real "Golden Age of Piracy" as spanning the late 1600s and early 1700s. Though piracy has existed for thousands of years (Julius Caesar was held for ransom by pirates at one point), to account for the success of pirates in the "Golden Age," one needs only to follow the trade and travel routes of European sailors to and from the Spanish Main, the coastal regions controlled by the Spanish Empire in the New World which stretched from Florida to the northern tip of South America. Spanish ships filled with treasure and bound for the Atlantic would find competition for their booty in the form of wayward privateers — experienced sailors with private ships who served as hired pirates for European governments in times of conflict. Privateers were authorized to attack and loot enemy ships with the promise to share their booty with the employing monarch (Elizabeth I referred to the knighted privateer Sir Francis Drake as "my dear pirate"). Unsurprisingly, during peacetime, it was not uncommon for these privateers to continue their lucrative work on their own behalf.

Buccaneers, whose name became synonymous with privateers and pirates, got their start on the island of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti) as European settlers who subsisted on native wildlife. The Arawak word *buccan* refers to a wooden frame for smoking meat, and over time it was adapted by the French to *boucan*. The unaffiliated hunters who killed and smoked

the wild pigs and rustled the cattle of Hispaniola became known as *boucaniers*. After the Spanish forced them off the island, the *buccaneers*, as the English called them, exacted revenge on the Spanish by attacking cargo-laden ships by sea and often torturing and killing their crews. Because of the typical pirate ship's democratic processes for electing a captain and splitting booty equally, the pirate's lifestyle was often preferable to that of an enlisted man.

To ensure swift (and effortless) surrender of an enemy's crew, pirates milked their infamous reputations as cutthroats in order to strike fear in the hearts of their victims upon sight. Perhaps the most famous pirate is Edward Teach, also known as Blackbeard, who began as a privateer for the British in Jamaica, attacking Spanish and French ships. After leaving England's employ, Teach commandeered a stolen ship, naming it *Queen Anne's Revenge*, and established his base in the colony of North Carolina in the early 1700s. Reports vary on Blackbeard's methods of intimidation, but it was rumored that he would sever the fingers of women who refused to give up their rings. He also reportedly set his long braided beard on fire, or placed lit cannon fuses in his hair, surrounding his head with black plumes of

smoke that made him resemble a demon. But David Moore of the North Carolina Maritime Museum points out that the best-known pirates were not necessarily the most successful: "The reason many of them became famous was because they were captured and tried before an Admiralty court. Many of these court proceedings were published, and these pirates' exploits became legendary. But it's the ones who did not get caught who were the most successful in my book."

Indeed, the Golden Age of Piracy effectively ended with Blackbeard's death and subsequent beheading at the hands of the British Navy in 1718. By this time, treasure shipments from the New World to Europe were slowing down, and privateers were being replaced by more professional navies. Stricter laws discouraged business transactions between pirates and the public, which had historically benefited from commerce with pirates while being terrorized by them.

Did piracy on the high seas ever end? The answer is no. Heavily armed bandits continue to terrorize the waters of the Indian Ocean in particular, and prey upon ships with valuable cargo using global positioning systems and speedboats. The coasts of Indonesia and Somalia continue to represent hotbeds of pirate activity, with hundreds of incidents reported each year. In early 2005 a Boston-area couple was attacked by pirates off the coast of Yemen and lived to tell the tale after a violent shootout. It is safe to conclude that as long as humans continue to traffic on the ocean, pirates will roam in search of new conquests. — AH

Where is Penzance?

Located in Cornwall (southwest England), Penzance is a picturesque coastal town that, historically, was subjected to foreign raids as a result of its location. By 1879, when Gilbert and Sullivan penned *The Pirates of Penzance*, the town had a reputation for being a serene place to live and visit, and a center of commerce for the region. In naming their musical *The Pirates of Penzance*, Gilbert and Sullivan infuse the story with irony through its unexpected title. — AH