

PIRATES AND PIRACY IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract: *Piracy is both an ancient and a modern social ill. Yet in American popular culture pirates have emerged as dashing heroic figures and Robin Hoods of the Sea. Some examples of this transformation of the pirate image from criminal to popular hero are explored in British and American fiction, cinema and other forms of popular culture.*

Keywords: *Daphné du Maurier, pirate fiction, pirate films, pirate festival, Rafael Sabatini, Robert Lewis Stevenson*

1. Introduction

In historical records piracy predates the Christian era by over 1000 years and chronicles of piracy include the Hyksos and Sea Peoples, the Vikings, the Barbary Pirates and the real pirates of the Caribbean. Piracy remains a modern social ill today, with pirates operating off the coast of Somalia, Nigeria and Cameroon and in the waters around Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In American popular culture, in novels, films and other media, pirates have emerged as dashing heroic figures, battling injustice and serving as Robin Hoods of the Sea. In the years leading up to April 2009, when the mass communications media in the United States focused on piracy, their attention usually involved Johnny Depp and *The Pirates of the Caribbean* film series (2003, 2006, 2007, 2011). Pirates in contemporary American popular culture appear in print media, film, TV, product advertising, “cultural” events, and sports. Most such pirate images are generally favourable.

There is a profound disconnect between the realities of piracy and the popular image of it found in most commercial entertainment media. The pirate has been presented in a romanticized and sanitized way that masks the brutality, cruelty and depravity of piracy in the real world.

With the 2009 seizure of the container ship *Maersk Alabama*, a container ship sailing under the American flag, American popular attention shifted briefly to the topic of Somali pirates and the real nature of piracy. But media interest quickly faded after the U.S. Navy Seals dispatched three of the pirates to their rendezvous with Allah, arrested a fourth, and rescued the captured American captain. For that short period of time U.S. press coverage of pirates was focused on the *Maersk Alabama* (Hawkins 2010), but that was 2009, and the level of press attention on piracy has declined substantially since. Even the release of the film on the event in 2013, *Captain Phillips*, did not spark a sustained revival of interest in piracy in the U.S. entertainment media.

Once again the media have returned to the popular mythology of piracy as a romantic enterprise, waged against unscrupulous merchants and dishonest political leaders. Johnny

Depp and *The Pirates of the Caribbean* films epitomize yet again the popular image of the pirate, demonstrated abundantly by the film series now in its fifth iteration. This is not a new phenomenon. Pirates have captured the popular imagination of the public for much more than a century, and in some cases, more than a millennium. If one is to include the Vikings as pirates, as this author does, then the Norse sagas were part of the body of piracy literature a thousand years ago, and remain with us to this day. These sagas were neither history nor fiction, but a hybrid of both, revealing actual events in highly exaggerated ways to enhance the prestige of the participants.

The first published account of piracy in the age of European expansionism and exploration was written by Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin in 1678. Originally written in Dutch and published in Amsterdam as *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers*, the book still circulates today under the titles *The Buccaneers of America* (1972, 2000), *The History of the Buccaneers of America* (2006), *The Illustrated Pirate Diaries: A Remarkable Eyewitness Account of Captain Morgan and the Buccaneers* (2008), and several other titles and variations in the spelling and renderings of his name in English (Esquemeling 2007), German, French and Spanish translations.

One of the other early quasi-scholarly works on the subject of piracy was *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (2002[1724]) by Captain Charles Johnson. When first set in print in 1724 it was written for a well-educated popular audience, and provided a wealth of information on pirates and piracy, some based on legends and some on official records. Standards for genuine scholarship in the 18th century were non-existent then, and the work would not be considered academically sound today, but for its place in the history of piracy literature. It names the most well-known pirates of that time, and recounts their more spectacular exploits. Johnson's book remains in print today and is considered the first source on piracy, even though it is not rigorously documented. Johnson's accounts of pirates and piracy were not flattering, and his pirates were "desperados, who were the terror of the trading part of the world" (Johnson 2002[1724]).

2. Popular Fiction

Pirates have been popular subject matter in action and adventure tales since the accounts of Captain Charles Johnson were first published in 1724. While Johnson's work was intended to be historical and accurate, pirates also became figures in popular fiction. Lord Byron's lengthy romantic poem "The Corsair" (1814) is set in Mediterranean waters. The corsair, a pirate captain, seeks to free his love, captured and enslaved by the Turks.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1884) introduced pirates to a wide audience with the classic adventure tale *Treasure Island* in 1883. The prolific Rafael Sabatini (1875-1950) created several pirate characters among his many adventure stories. Starting with *Frenchman's Creek* (1941) by Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989), numerous romance novels have used the character of the lusty, charismatic pirate captain as the seducer of the heroine. These novels, taken together, have shaped the popular image of pirates and piracy for the English-language world.

2.1. Long John Silver and *Treasure Island*

In the adventure yarn *Treasure Island* (1883) Robert Louis Stevenson shows most pirates as evil, duplicitous and violent men willing to do anything to acquire Captain Flint's buried treasure. But one among those pirates, Long John Silver, shows a more complex character, equally able to be beguiling or threatening. The events are set around 1760, and involve a treasure map, sought by pirates who had sailed with Captain Flint in the 1750s, still

eager to claim their share of Flint's buried treasure. But the map and a diary come into the possession of young Jim Hawkins and he shows it to some honest, law abiding men. They set out to find that treasure, but unknowingly sign on a crew comprised of many of Flint's old pirates, led by Silver. Conflict between the honest treasure-hunters and the old pirates erupts when all reach Flint's treasure island and the search for the gold begins.

When *Treasure Island* was first published as a magazine serial in 1883, the pirates were presented as wicked, homicidal men. Clearly a piece of fiction, the novel borrowed some names and places from the Johnson book to give the story some verisimilitude. While the central pirate figure, Long John Silver, was purely fictional, in the novel he sailed with Israel Hands, the name of a real pirate named in Johnson's book, who had sailed under Captain Edward Teach (Blackbeard) prior to Teach's 1718 death (Johnson 2002:59).

It was necessary to give Silver some positive attributes that could gain and hold the loyalty of the young Jim Hawkins. Thus Long John Silver had a charm and appeal to him which made him one of literature's more interesting villains. There is a complex duality in the character. Long John Silver is both a personable crewman, and villainous cut-throat.

When *Treasure Island* was made into a film in 1934, with Wallace Beery as Silver and Jackie Cooper as Jim Hawkins, his image softened even more. The 1950 Walt Disney version continued this trend and Silver, played by Robert Newton, was a rascal, but not so much a villain. With the character of Long John Silver there to open the door, other pirates moved toward social acceptability.

2.2. Rafael Sabatini and the Gentleman Pirate

The prolific novelist Rafael Sabatini (1875-1950) created several important pirate characters among his many adventure stories. Sabatini created the heroic pirates of *The Sea Hawk* in 1915 and *Captain Blood* in 1922. So successful was his Captain Blood character that he wrote two sequels about him, *Captain Blood Returns* (1930), called *The Chronicles of Captain Blood* in Britain, and *The Fortunes of Captain Blood* (1936). He created a third pirate for the adventure tale, *The Black Swan* (1932). Both *Captain Blood* and *The Sea Hawk* were made into motion pictures in 1924 (Ossian 2008) and both were remade with Errol Flynn in the starring roles of both (*Captain Blood*, 1935; *The Sea Hawk*, 1940). Over the years his *Captain Blood* novels have been filmed six times and also produced as a seven-hour radio dramatization.

Sabatini added a dimension of romance to the pirate tale, absent in *Treasure Island*. His stories are still adventure yarns, but a woman plays an important part in each, as a damsel in distress. The pirate thus evolves into the knight in tarnished armour. Indeed, in *The Sea Hawk* the central character is both knight and pirate.

The Sea Hawk (1915) unfolds between 1588 and 1593, and tells the story of Sir Oliver Tressilian. He is betrayed by his half-brother, wrongly accused of murder, and sold as a galley slave. While a galley slave he befriends a Muslim also enslaved on the galley. Their galley is captured by Barbary pirates and he is set free. He joins the Muslims and takes the name of *Sakr-el-Bahr*, the "Hawk of the Sea" in Arabic. Eventually, he and the pirates capture his beloved Rosamund and his evil half-brother. Sir Oliver rescues Rosamund from slavery, marries her and extracts a confession from his half-brother which clears him of the murder charge.

In *Captain Blood* (1922), Captain Peter Blood had been a medical doctor who was wrongfully arrested, tried and convicted of aiding rebels against King James II following the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685. As punishment, he was transported to Barbados and sold as a slave on the plantation of the governor. He escaped, captured a Spanish ship bent on attacking the colony, became a pirate who never attacked British ships, and saved the daughter of the

governor who had enslaved him. Still a pirate, he saves the Jamaica colony from capture, and eventually is restored to good graces under the authority of the new king, William. As a reward for his heroism, Blood is pardoned, named governor of Jamaica, and takes the daughter of the former governor as his bride.

The Black Swan (1932) unfolds during the time when Sir Henry Morgan supposedly was governor of Jamaica. This would place the events in the novel around the 1670s. In the war against Spain, Morgan was a privateer and aggressively waged war against Spanish interests in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Morgan actually was admiral of the fleet positioned there to defend against the Spanish just prior to the peace treaty of 1670, served as lieutenant governor from 1674 and briefly as acting governor in 1681. In the book, Morgan employs some of his former pirate allies in an effort to suppress other Caribbean pirates some time after the peace with Spain. When the heroine of the tale is captured by the bad pirates (those former privateers who refused to stop their predations on Spanish shipping after the peace treaty and turned to attacking all shipping), the tale turns into a rescue mission. The hero of the story, Captain Jamie Waring, a privateer who has remained loyal to Sir Henry Morgan, does battle with the renegade privateers and rescues the heroine from them.

A typical Sabatini pirate captain really is a person of good character, thrust into piracy by some social injustice. He demonstrates his moral virtue by rescuing a woman in distress, protecting her from other pirates and other dangers. Thus romance was introduced to pirate fiction.

2.3. Daphné du Maurier and the Romance Novel Pirate

Beginning with *Frenchman's Creek* (1941) by Daphné du Maurier (1907-1989), numerous romance novels have used the character of the lusty, charismatic pirate captain with an honourable side as the seducer of the heroine. Still in print after three-quarters of a century, *Frenchman's Creek* today is considered a classic in its genre. Du Maurier preferred not to be characterized as a "romantic," and she wrote numerous novels and short stories which would not be classified as such. But the success of *Frenchman's Creek* could not be ignored, and its place in that genre is beyond dispute. Her novel was made into a film in 1944 with Joan Fontaine as the British aristocrat Dona St. Columb, and Arturo de Córdova as the French pirate Jean Benoit Aubrey, who wins her heart.

It is in the genre of the romance novel that the popular image of the pirate has been the most glamorized. Advancing the theme initiated by Sabatini, pirates have become the rescuers of ladies in distress, often from other pirates. Beginning with *Frenchman's Creek* by du Maurier (1941), an entire sub-genre of romance novels, most now written by women, have created a highly romanticized image of the pirate captain. The website Squidoo.com has posted its list of the ten best-selling pirate romance novels (2012), provided in the textbox which follows:

The Ten Bestselling Pirate Romance Novels

Forever Neverland by Heather Killough-Walden.

Bound by the Heart, by Marsha Canham.

Steel, by Carrie Vaughn.

Gentle Rogue, by Johanna Lindsey

The Pirate Lord (Lord Trilogy, Book 1), by Sabrina Jeffries, writing as Deborah Martin.

Guardian Angel, by Julie Garwood

The Care and Feeding of Pirates, by Jennifer Ashley (2005).

Frenchman's Creek, by Daphné du Maurier (1941)

The Gift, by Julie Garwood

The Pirate Prince (part of Ascension Trilogy), by Gaelen Foley

(Source: Squidoo.com, 2012)

These romantic images of pirate captains have influenced the popular imagination for decades. In five of these ten novels, the leader of the pirates is an aristocrat. They have turned to piracy as a consequence of great injustices done to them in three of the novels. Five involve some form of escape by the heroine, aided by the pirate. The women find themselves being rescued from bad pirates by good pirates in three of the stories, and from unwanted suitors or abusive husbands in four (Squidoo.com 2012).

That such a list is even compiled is indicative of the popularity of the genre in American popular fiction. Romantic images of pirate captains result in many readers and viewers who do not see pirates as ruthless criminals, but as romantic rakes who can be reformed by the love of a good, but adventuresome woman.

Such images may seem foolish and illogical, and have been criticized for playing into women's superficial fantasies. While this may be so, pirates have also served a minor role in the Feminist Movement. Erica Jong's 1980 novel *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones* finds the heroine taking a turn as an 18th century Caribbean pirate among her adventures. Jong, true to her uniquely colourful and bawdy ways, sets out to create a character who is simultaneously both modern and contextually historical.

3. The Pirates Go to the Movies

The earliest pirate film was a 1908 version of *Treasure Island*. In 1916 Lillian Gish, then a silver-screen superstar, played the title role in *Daphne and the Pirate*, another early pirate film. In 1924 the first film adaptation of *Peter Pan* was released by Paramount. Other silent films portrayed pirates in the silent era of filmmaking.

Popular film routinely takes the plots, characters and images of the successful novels to disseminate them to even larger audiences by adapting these novels to screenplays. Robert Ossian has compiled a list of over three hundred pirate movies on his *Pirates Cove* website (2008). The 1908 version of *Treasure Island* was the first of many film adaptations of the Robert Louis Stevenson's classic adventure tale. There were three more silent film versions of *Treasure Island* before the first "talkie", the 1934 version with Wallace Beery as Long John Silver and Jackie Cooper as Jim Hawkins. It had a truly stellar supporting cast, with Lionel Barrymore, Otto Kruger, Nigel Bruce and Lewis Stone among them. The first color remake was in 1950 by the Disney studios, with Bobby Driscoll as Jim Hawkins and Robert Newton as Long John Silver. Newton reprised the role in a subsequent 1954 Australian-made film,

Long John Silver and in a 1955 TV series *The Adventures of Long John Silver* reflecting the popularity of this pirate character (Wikipedia-Newton 2012). Newton also had played a pirate captain in the 1952 film *Blackbeard the Pirate* and his exaggerated accent and use of the guttural “argh” gave pirates their characteristic, stereotypical voice.

The two highly successful novels of Rafael Sabatini, *The Sea Hawk* in 1915 and *Captain Blood* in 1922, both were made into silent motion pictures in 1924. Both films were remade as talkies with Errol Flynn starring as *Captain Blood* in 1935 and as *The Sea Hawk* in 1940. In *Captain Blood* (1935) Hollywood took some liberties with the story, but it did follow the general plot of Sabatini’s novel. However, the Errol Flynn version of *The Sea Hawk* (1940) was not based on the Sabatini plot and simply employed the title and some elements of the original story. A third Sabatini novel, *The Black Swan*, also became a motion picture in 1942, but this time it was Tyrone Power playing the lead and Maureen O’Hara, Lady Margaret, the damsel in distress. Power plays Captain Jamie Waring, a reformed pirate loyal to Sir Henry Morgan. Waring suppresses rogue pirates, rescues Lady Margaret from them and, in doing so, wins her love (Wikipedia-Black Swan 2012).

Errol Flynn appeared in yet another pirate film in 1952, *Against All Flags*, opposing Maureen O’Hara as a female pirate based in Madagascar in the 1700s (Ossian 2008). At that time Madagascar was indeed a pirate colony and base from which pirates could attack shipping in the Indian Ocean.

Certainly not all depictions of pirates have portrayed them as heroic men. Pirates have served as the effective foils and villains in action-adventure yarns, at least since the time of *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1883). Captain Hook in the 1904 play *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up*, by Sir James Matthew Barrie, later offered as a novel, *Peter and Wendy* (1911) and made famous in the Disney animated movie *Peter Pan*, was a total villain whom Peter had to fight to rescue his captive boys and Wendy. In *Hook* (1991) the tale is re-focused on Captain Hook, played by Dustin Hoffman, and still thoroughly villainous. The story was retold in 2003 again with actors rather than cartoons, and in a more serious, adult tone (Ebert 2003).

4. Pirates as Non-Threatening Comedic Figures

While most of the early pirate films were action-adventure tales and romances, *The Crimson Pirate* (1952) with Burt Lancaster and Nick Cravat is as much a slapstick comedy as an action-adventure yarn. Nick Cravat, playing the mute Ojo, was a talented acrobat and he and Lancaster used their acrobatic skills in the film to confront pursuers and achieve numerous implausible escapes.

The Princess and the Pirate with Bob Hope and Virginia Mayo (1944) was another early film comedy with pirates as the foils to Bob Hope’s foolish antics. The pirates were evil, avaricious men, but somewhat inept, giving Hope, as Sylvester the Great, an entertainer and actor on the same ship as the princess, the opportunity to come to her rescue.

The Princess Bride (1987), based on the novel by William Goldman (1973), features the “Dread Pirate Robert” (Cary Elwes) in a comic action adventure film in which the young hero takes on the role of pirate in a quest to reclaim his lost sweetheart and save her from real villains.

The Pirates Who Don’t Do Anything – A VeggieTales Movie (2008) employs cartoon vegetables as the crew of a pirate ship, and clearly was intended for children. Among the more recent animated pirate films is the 2012 feature-length cartoon, *Pirates! Band of Misfits*, featuring a contest among rival pirate captains for the title of “pirate of the year.” These child-friendly films present the pirates as non-threatening comic beings who never really hurt anyone.

Pirates also have found a place in films with the fantasy-occult and pornographic genres. Both are blended in the films *Pirates* (2005), described as the most expensive pornographic film produced (Wikipedia-Pirates 2013) and *Pirates II – Stagnetti’s Revenge* (2008) which involves sex, fantasy and resurrection from the dead of the evil pirate Victor Stagnetti. Non-pornographic ghostly pirates have appeared in such films as Walt Disney’s 1968 comedy *Blackbeard’s Ghost*, and the more recent 2006 *Pirates of the Great Salt Lake*.

Even before film, pirates also have been employed in various comedic ways in other media. Gilbert and Sullivan wrote and produced the comic opera *Pirates of Penzance* for the stage in 1879. It is revealed that these pirates of Penzance, a popular English beach resort, are “all noblemen who have gone wrong” and are forgiven their piracy in the end and allowed to marry the daughters of their former adversary, a “very modern major general.”

5. Pirate Festivals and Other Commercial Applications

So popular are pirates today that some communities and schools have held pirate festivals, pirate costume parties and pirate days (Perdomo 2012). Quite possibly the oldest of these events is the Contraband Days Festival in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Since 1957 Lake Charles has held its annual Contraband Days Festival in honour of Jean Lafitte each May (Lake Charles, La. 2013). Jean Lafitte was a real pirate and privateer, immortalized in fiction in Lyle Saxon’s 1930 novel, *Lafitte the Pirate*, and in film, first by Cecil B. DeMille in *The Buccaneer* (1938) with Fredric March as Lafitte, and again in 1958 with Yul Brynner as Lafitte. Lafitte, a hero of the War of 1812 and somewhat notorious privateer, has been the subject of many books, both historic and fictional, as well as films. The National Parks Service site in New Orleans recognizes his contribution to the defence of that city in 1815 (National Parks Service 2013).

The Blackbeard Pirate Festival in Hampton, Virginia has been an annual summer event since the late 1990s (2012), the John LeVique Pirate Days in Madeira Beach, Florida since 2000 (King 2012). A newer piracy event is the Annual Michigan Pirate Festival in Grand Haven Michigan, begun in 2007 (Michigan Pirate Festival 2012).

Many port cities in the United States have pirate cruises for tourists and party-goers, including many in Florida, including Clearwater, Destin, Fort Myers, Madeira Beach, Panama City, Riviera Beach, and Tampa. At the Walt Disney World Magic Kingdom Theme Park in Orlando one of the featured attractions is the “Pirates of the Caribbean” ride (Walt Disney World 2012). Pirate ships also sail from Plymouth, Massachusetts and Baltimore, Maryland.

American advertisers frequently use the pirate image to promote their products. Captain Morgan’s Rum is sold via TV commercials with brief pirate vignettes. Kellogg’s Corn Flakes once included a pirate mask cut-out on its boxes. A popular seafood fast-food restaurant chain calls itself “Long John Silver’s” and uses pirate motifs in its stores, and there is even a Mexican “El Pirata” restaurant in Florida. The pirate is a popular Halloween character and has been for many decades, and the pirate costume was the third ranking in popularity in 2012 (LATimes 2013)!

There is a sufficient following of pirates and piracy to support a popular magazine for piracy aficionados, *Pirates Magazine* (2011). There is even an annual “International Talk Like a Pirate Day” on 19 September.

Parker Brothers once marketed a board game, *Captain Kidd and His Treasure*, copyrighted in 1896. Today video games largely have replaced such board games. Kongregate.com offers a host of computerized piracy games, 93 listed as of early in 2013. *Battle Pirate*, the earliest of these, has been offered since 2006, and had been played by about 60,000 in 2013. Armor Games offers *Pirateers* for on-line play. Another contemporary computer game, *Seafight*, from BigPoint.com (2013), also can be played on-line.

6. Pirates as Sporting Mascots

The image of the pirate as a heroic figure to be emulated has been carried on by sports teams using the pirate as their mascots. The Pittsburgh Alleghenies took up the name Pirates in 1891 and have retained the name and image of the pirate ever since Pittsburgh Pirates (MLB.com 2012).

At least seven college football and basketball teams also call themselves “Pirates” and numerous high schools also have adopted the name. Other sports teams use the name Buccaneers, most notably the National Football League’s Tampa Bay franchise. Their name was chosen in a name-the-team contest sponsored by the *Tampa Tribune* in 1974 (Awosika and Zaloude 2003). Three or more college teams calling themselves the Buccaneers, as do numerous high schools.

Although some might argue that Vikings were not pirates, the people who endured their raids or perished in their attacks likely would disagree. Yet we have sports teams also named after these notorious sea raiders. In the National Football League we have the Minnesota Vikings, so named in 1960, supposedly to reflect upon and honour the Scandinavian heritage of so many of the residents of the greater Minneapolis area (Wikipedia-Minnesota Vikings 2012). At least seven colleges and universities use the Viking for a mascot. In Ireland the University of Limerick also uses the Viking as its sports mascot. And as with Pirates and Buccaneers, many high schools also use the name Vikings for their team identities.

The symbolic meaning of a mascot has been hotly debated in recent years as Amerind groups have objected to their tribal names and images being used as college and professional mascots. Those who have defended their use often argue that no insult or degradation is intended or implied, and that such names are chosen to reflect on the positive attributes of the mascot named after the tribe. If this is so, what are the positive attributes of the pirate, the Viking or the buccaneer? Do we honour and hope to emulate aggressiveness, wanton violence, pillaging, arson, robbery, rape and murder? Or do we admire only the freedom, independence and adventure-seeking that the pirate lifestyle implies?

7. The Mythology of Benevolent, Chivalrous Pirates. Robin Hood at Sea

Popular fiction often portrays the pirate captain as chivalrous toward women and generous to the poor. While some pirates may have acted chivalrously in some rare cases, the fate of most women captured by them was far more likely to be gang rape and subsequent sexual enslavement. The wives and daughters of the very rich and the very powerful might be kept for eventual ransom, but even they might be used sexually while in captivity. Edward Teach reportedly took, literally, fourteen wives, so-called, some of whom he prostituted out (Johnson 2002:50).

Some pirates did place restrictions on themselves regarding captive women, as Captain John Phillips imposed in 1723, “If any of you meet with a prudent Woman, that Man that offers to meddle with her, without her Consent, shall suffer present death” (quoted in Burgess 2010:70). But it is far more likely that it was the prudent women, resisting such “meddling,” who met with present death.

When Errol Flynn played Captain Blood on the big screen in 1935, the plot was a close match to his subsequent 1938 portrayal of Robin Hood in film. An honourable man is wronged. He turns to crime (piracy or banditry) to fight the oppressor. He rescues and defends a threatened noble lady. He shares the wealth with his comrades and the poor and oppressed. In the *Crown’s Spies* Series novels of Julie Garwood (1990), the pirate Pagan is portrayed as a

Robin Hood figure, sharing the riches taken from the wealthy merchants and elites with the poor. In the contemporary film series *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the pirate Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) repeatedly rescues the damsel in distress and does battle with the unjust. With pirates such as these, it is no wonder that the word pirate has lost its fearful connotations and in today's popular culture the pirate can be seen as an heroic figure.

The image of the pirate as a benefactor of the poor had some basis in fact, but for the most cynical of reasons. Pirates needed bases of operation ashore and the friendship of the people in those communities where they took shelter and reprovisioned their ships. To acquire this friendship, they would be generous in the division of their spoils, and paid fair prices for produce, marine stores and other wants. Their protectors gained access to stolen luxury goods, captive women and, in some places where they would be valued, slaves taken from the crews and passengers of captive ships. This was certainly the case of Mediterranean pirates from European countries in the 17th and 18th centuries who took refuge in North African ports. However, for every beneficiary ashore there had to be many "bill payers," those people who were robbed at sea or had their homes and businesses ashore looted by sea raiders, and whose assets were taken so that the pirates could be selectively generous with their allies.

Pirates occasionally may have resisted tyranny and redressed popular grievances, but this was far from common. Yet their popular image suggests that it was their primary purpose. There are some who would cast the pirate as a sea-going "social bandit" on the model first presented by Eric Hobsbawn (1959). As Hobsbawn (1965:23) described the concept, "The fundamental pattern of banditry, as I have tried to sketch it here, is almost universally found in certain conditions. It is rural, not urban. The peasant societies in which it occurs know rich and poor, powerful and weak, rulers and ruled, but remain profoundly and tenaciously traditional and pre-capitalist in structure." But pirates do not fit the mold cast by Hobsbawn. They were not rural peasants driven into the ranks of criminals as a consequence of some minor infraction; were far from traditional, and were, after a fashion, venture capitalists operating in the cosmopolitan world of international trade and commerce, and they were aggressively seeking a thick slice of that commerce for themselves.

8. Conclusions

So what may account for the American love affair with the pirate? Is it their independence? Is it their willingness to confront oppressive authority? Is it their pillaging, violence, and brutal criminality? Do Americans really find this deviant lifestyle appealing? Or do we simply need to experience more *Maersk Alabama* events to see piracy for what it is? And what is it? It is a violent, avaricious practice which results in deaths of some, kidnappings of others, and great economic loss to the victims of the pirates. It disrupts commerce and drives up costs for all consumers. It is profoundly evil and should not be romanticized. But it will be romanticized as long as the public entertainment media choose to present pirates and piracy as a socially acceptable, heroic outlaw, battling injustice and taking up the cause of the downtrodden.

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