Guy Chet

The Ocean is a Wilderness: Atlantic Piracy and the Limits of State Authority, 1688–1856. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014. xvii + 157 pp. (Paper US\$ 22.95)

This is a short book with big claims. Guy Chet describes himself as one of the Atlantic historians who, in focusing on local and regional interactions rather than metropolitan institutions, sees empire as less united and more fragmented than those who focus on high politics and statutory law. The result in this case is a revisionist history that seeks to counter the view of previous maritime historians (Robert Ritchie, Marcus Rediker, and Kris Lane) who regard the 1720s as the end of the golden age of Atlantic piracy and its transition to a golden age of privateering as the result of a growing British administrative presence in, and military command of, the Atlantic world. Chet, by contrast, puts the date for the end of Atlantic piracy more than a century later, in the mid-nineteenth century. He attributes its curtailment not to successful policing on the part of the Royal Navy or the state building endeavors of aspiring central governments (who in most cases dealt with piracy by accommodation instead of confrontation), but rather to shifting economic opportunities that rendered maritime predation less attractive.

Rejecting the view that an attitudinal sea change in the 1720s from piracy to privateering was the result of effective naval prowess and bureaucratic administration, Chet argues that seafaring and coastal communities on both sides of the Atlantic regarded the British government's attempts at institutional reach as intrusions into the ongoing practices of local society. The ocean thus became a theater wherein the contest between an aspiring state's centralizing endeavors were played out against the traditional customs of local communities whose residents fought to cling to old ways of collaboration between maritime predators and local elites. Chet thus sees the courts and their laws as a sign of the state's inability to deal with the maritime realm and not as a reflection of actual circumstances. The legalistic distinction between "piracy" and "privateering" so clearly drawn by the eighteenth-century courts was neither discernible in practice nor accepted by local communities. Privateering was not a well-regulated business whose commissions articulated the boundary of legitimate commerce raiding. Rather, it demonstrated the weakness of the state in its ability to rein in the ocean's floating wilderness.

Chet also takes issue with the claim that in time as local economies matured and stabilized, merchants came to oppose pirates as a threat to their business. Instead, he argues that merchants were not the enemies of pirates or freebooters because the rise of the insurance industry in the eighteenth century put the

risk of loss at sea not on merchant shoulders but on insurers' backs. Merchants could have it both ways by taking out policies on their own cargoes wherein they would make some money in the event of loss, while at the same time continuing to invest in and profit from piracy against the vessels of their competitors. The rise of insurance led to merchant-pirate collaboration, not to the diminution of merchant interest in benefitting from piracy. Ultimately, insurers, not merchants, sided with central governments and lobbied for stronger antipirate protection and the requirement that all the insured vessels sail under the protection of government convoys.

Piracy in the Atlantic ended with the advent of greater economic opportunities in the South Seas and tariff reductions in Britain following the Napoleonic Wars. In the eighteenth-century Atlantic, constant war and high tariffs transformed smuggling into a pillar of local economies in Britain and North America. High tariffs created significant differentials in the market price of commodities on which the tariffs had been paid and those on which they had not. Government attempts to suppress smuggling failed. However, this ended in the 1830s and 1840s when the British government changed course by adopting a free-trade policy and reducing customs duties on imports that undercut the profitability of both piracy and smuggling and led to their demise.

This paperback book is interesting, accessible, and easy to read. Because of its straightforward arguments and clear prose, it could be readily employed as the basis for setting up a classroom debate or providing insight into the working of historical argument. However, historical reality is not as linear, clear cut, or mono-causal as Chet's narrative would have us believe. The actual story of both the reasons for the persistence of piracy well beyond the 1720s and its disappearance in the nineteenth century probably lie somewhere between the claims Chet endeavors to refute and those he is trying to make. His own brief account remains silent both on what actually enabled the changes in the ability of the state to control its coasts and regularize its collection of customs duties during the nineteenth century and the ways freebooting moved out of the Atlantic. Readers are simply to take his word that it happened.

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