

Keith Thomson, *Born to Be Hanged: The Epic Story of the Gentlemen Pirates who Raided the South Seas, Rescued a Princess, and Stole a Fortune*. New York: Little, Brown, 2022. xi + 371pp. (Cloth US\$ 32.00)

David Graeber, *Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2023. xxix + 175 pp. (Cloth US\$ 22.99)

These two books examine buccaneers not in their Caribbean nests, but rather in the seas and oceans into which they fled by around 1680 to escape prosecution. In *Born to Be Hanged*, novelist Keith Thomson distills published pirate accounts of South Sea or Spanish Pacific raiding circa 1680 into a rollicking narrative, and the late anthropologist David Graeber blends eighteenth-century narratives with modern ethnography to propose a pirate utopia in northeast Madagascar, the “real Libertalia” of the title. Thomson’s buccaneers rescued an Indigenous princess in Panama, and Graeber’s raiders did one better: they married Malagasy women and found enlightenment. Both books toggle between pirate longings and ours.

Chronologically, Thomson’s book comes first. England’s antipirate crackdown dates to the twilight of Henry Morgan, in his role as Lt. Governor of Jamaica. By 1680, Morgan’s former companions found it wise to clear out of the Caribbean. To escape their “hanging” fate, many “gentlemen pirates” crossed the Panamanian Isthmus and stole vessels from Spanish subjects on Pacific shores. The South Sea buccaneers, as they came to be known, struggled to seize treasure, and they often splintered into rival factions, but they terrorized Spanish subjects from southern Chile to northwest Mexico for 15 years. The last buccaneers to leave Pacific waters in 1695 were French, and their tales inspired commercial intrusions in subsequent decades. Thomson focuses on the first, mostly Anglophone raids led by Captain Bartholomew Sharp and rivals.

Much more than during their Caribbean marauding, the buccaneers of this Pacific-oriented wave or cycle kept journals. They also stole and elaborated maps, charts, and images of coastlines as tradeable “intelligence,” handy for avoiding the noose on their return to England and its colonies. It is from the South Sea buccaneers’ own journals, including those of William Dampier, Basil Ringrose, Bartholomew Sharp, Lionel Wafer, and a few others, that Thomson constructs his breezy, three-part narrative (“The Sacred Hunger of Gold,” “The South Seas,” and “Straits”). The dicey Darién crossing animates Part One, and Part Three treats the harrowing return to the Atlantic by land and sea. Sandwiched in between are layers of plunder, boozing, gambling, mutiny, and mayhem. Thomson draws also on English court records, but Spanish sources remain absent save for depositions taken in London.

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

Speaking of the Spanish, apparently to ease digestion Thomson opens with the standard “Indians good, Spaniards bad.” This caricature provides the buccaneers breathing room for a readership conditioned to hate “conquistadors.” Most disarming is a pirate alliance with the Guna of Panama, plus the rescue of their “princess” from the evil Spaniards. But Thomson is too good a writer and storyteller to paint in black and white for long. His buccaneers are neither heroes nor villains but rather what they called themselves: “a pack of merry boys” out for adventure, which is to say, wanton pillage spiced with murder. As he introduces ambivalent “journalists” like Basil Ringrose and William Dampier, Thomson aligns to a degree with Graeber, whose Madagascar pirates were young and restless nonconformists. More than treasure, they sought freedom. Or some did. Maybe.

The hated “Spaniards” also grow more complex in Thomson’s telling, as sometimes sympathetic figures: diverse colonial subjects of a distant, clueless king. Native peoples likewise emerge as individuals and members of diverse cultures following their own imperatives. (Africans remain voiceless, and Thomson excuses himself from trying to imagine their equally varied predicaments.) As if taking a page from Graeber, Thomson’s pirates make much of “conversation” with fellow subalterns struggling to help one another while helping themselves. Throughout Thomson’s tale, lost and injured buccaneers are saved by “Indian” friends and African “man Fridays,” gestures rarely reciprocated.

Thomson’s understanding of Spanish American history hits limits, as when he discusses mines and Manila galleons, but this is in keeping with his reliance on the buccaneers’ own writings, replete with alternative facts. It is in their journals that the title phrase appears, credited to John Cox upon facing an unexpectedly turbulent Pacific: “it being a certain truth that those born to be hang’d shall never be drown’d” (p. 68). Not all buccaneers were so waterproof, but Thomson finds survivors of South Sea misadventures as tough as nails. This extends to journalists like the surgeon Lionel Wafer, who thanks to his Guna hosts survived serious burns.

Thomson opens with an excellent map, inspired by the work of Norman Thrower and Derek Howse, and pirate tactics and material life are treated with precision thanks to the work of Benerson Little, also credited. As for the core story, Thomson does a fine job stitching together a seamless narrative from the rich pirate journals detailing the maraudings and meanderings of Sharp’s gang. None got rich, and many lost what little they stole to dice and drink. But all who survived had a tale to tell, and—sometimes—to sell. Indeed, despite their accursed fate, most of this crew appears to have been “born to be acquitted.”

The buccaneers’ defense rested in part on alliance with Guna “king” Golden Cap, which brings us back to David Graeber’s pirates and their ties to local kings

in Madagascar starting circa 1690. After pillaging the Spanish Pacific, Anglo-American buccaneers flowed into the Indian Ocean in search of new prey, a monsoon-driven journey known as the Pirate Round. Whereas Lionel Wafer's dreamy account of life among the Guna spawned the so-called Darien Disaster, what emerged in northeast Madagascar, according to Graeber, was "the real Libertia."

Graeber's slight book, first published in French in 2019, extends part of the argument he and archaeologist David Wengrow made with humor (and success) in a far more substantial book: *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). Graeber's fascination with piracy on Madagascar brewed for decades, dating to his doctoral fieldwork among the Betsimisaraka and Zana-Malata, who claim descent from pirates who intermarried with local coast-dwellers. Divided in three parts ("Pirates and Mock Kings of the Malagasy Northeast," "The Advent of the Pirates from the Malagasy Point of View," and "Pirate Enlightenment"), Graeber's essay continually flips perspectives to counter nagging doubts.

As in *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber calls kingship a transient or "mock" phenomenon, produced spontaneously by acute need such as a fight with neighbors, and easily dissolved in the "off-season." More curious are "stranger kings," or outsiders whose apparent power and access to exotic goods provoked apotheosis (viz., Captain Cook). Women drove this train, drawing such strangers into domestic alliances in order to dominate trade, while redirecting local male pretensions. Graeber argues that the sudden influx of pirates in northeast Madagascar circa 1700 fit this pattern but also spawned something new—what he calls pirate enlightenment, a hybrid political experiment built on sex, talk, bluster (to scare off outsiders), and reciprocity.

Believing in pirate enlightenment requires trust in Graeber's reading of a mid-eighteenth-century manuscript relating the story of Malata "mock king" Ratsimalaho, plus selective reading of Charles Johnson and other sources on pirate life in Madagascar between the 1701 execution of William Kidd and the mass execution of alleged pirates that ended by 1726. Kidd is not mentioned, nor is the 1986 work of Robert C. Ritchie that gave context to the Pirate Round. Graeber's command of ethnographic and archaeological material may offset such omissions, but the overall argument builds on a series of "what-ifs" and mental back flips, casting doubt along the way on other scholars' ability to see what was "really going on."

Graeber seems less interested in piracy's violently acquisitive side than its utopian or anti-authoritarian impulses. He favors a kind of self-defense argument in the end, which helps explain the election of "pirate kings" to lead the charge in "mock battles" in the magical space that is Madagascar. Pillage is

never the point, nor is kingship, which is only “good for a day.” The point is to hang out and talk, and to enjoy a pirate potlatch—run by Malagasy women.

Both authors note that Caribbean buccaneers were famously slippery, hence their unimpeded flows into the Pacific and Indian Oceans after 1680, before being absorbed into international conflicts as paramilitary pillagers. Their lives were to some extent enactments of their own and their enemies’ or victims’ fantasies. Today’s Guna do not claim to be descended from pirates as far as I know, but they acknowledge their ancestors’ having used the buccaneers to help confound the Spanish. Things turned out differently in northeast Madagascar, but “pirate blends” survived for a time, taunting ethnographers and historians to this day.

One may look to more recent surges in piracy worldwide and empathize with those who become fishers of men after having been deprived of a more humble catch. Somalian marauders in spindly speedboats may be the most enlightened of all global citizens. Like David Graeber, some of us who look on in wonder refuse to give up on the “real Libertalia,” and perhaps Keith Thomson would agree that like Peter Pan, we also want never to grow up.

Kris Lane

Department of History, Tulane University, New Orleans LA, U.S.A.

klaner@tulane.edu