

extremism.

**Or Goldenberg
King's College London**

David Wilson. *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-783-27595-3. Pp. xx, 280; maps, tables, appendices. Hardcover: £75.00/ \$130.00; e-book (epub/ pdf): £19.99/ \$24.99.

David Wilson's lucid, compelling re-assessment of the end of the 'Golden Age' of piracy in the decade following the end of the War of the Spanish Succession challenges the widely held argument that the British imperial state engaged in centrally directed and resourced 'Pirate Wars' to remove the threat of piracy to economic expansion. By tracking the pirates through the Caribbean, along the North American coast, into the Bight of Benin, round Cape Horn and up to the Red Sea this assessment stresses the economic opportunism, mobility, and limits of the threat, the changing character of piracy, and the wide range of actors engaged in dealing with the threat.

The British state lacked the economic power, resources, and focus to wage 'war' on such slippery and evasive foes. While a handful of warships were dispatched to affected areas, few were actually sent to address the rise of piracy. Most were stationed to protect the Colonies against more substantial threats. Few were effective against pirate vessels. Piracy flourished in ungoverned spaces, beyond the rule of law, notably around Caribbean islands like the Bahamas, which were not controlled by European empires, where grey area activities, including smuggling and wrecking, exploited loopholes. This phase of Caribbean piracy began with aggressive British mariners seizing bullion from the wreck of a Spanish treasure fleet, and taking control of the Bahamas. The collusion of local merchants was essential to dispose of pirated goods, more often tropical produce than gold and precious stones, while providing food and maritime supplies to sustain the maritime predators, often at inflated prices.

British responses to piracy were hampered by the massive debt burden incurred in major wars in 1688-1697 and 1702-1713, along with the ongoing Great Northern War, which only ended in 1721, and a brief war with Spain. These conflicts dominated contemporary naval deployments, leaving few ships to deal with piracy. The ships deployed to the Caribbean tended to be too big and slow to chase pirates and, until the 1720s, Captains tended to use

them to trade on their own account, rather than pursue pirates. While Colonial assemblies petitioned the Government in London for support, their expectations were low, so they raised their own naval forces to secure their interests. These ‘Colonial Navies’ and colonial initiatives were effective, notably in ending the career of Edward Thache, ‘Blackbeard’, a small colonial vessel under naval command using local intelligence to strike while the pirates were dispersed. Such successes were rare. The defeat and death of Bartholomew Roberts off the West African coast in 1722 was the other high-profile naval success. Other pirates were captured or defeated by aggressive armed merchant vessels. In 1726 the Navy drove the last Caribbean pirates, by then a pathetic remnant, off the Honduran coast to facilitate Anglo-Spanish smuggling.

Bart Roberts’ fate reflected the mobility of the pirate threat. When the Caribbean became too risky, pirates moved north to plunder the Newfoundland fisheries, across the Atlantic to raid African trade and the slave ships, seizing larger vessels and heading round Cape Horn to Madagascar. The naval deployment that ended Roberts’ career reflected the political power of the African merchants and slave traders. However, the East India Company was the only organisation with the political weight to secure a pre-emptive deployment of warships. Alarmed by the possibility of a recurrence of Indian Ocean piracy, which had soured relations with the Mughal Empire around 1700, the era of Captain Kidd, the Company secured a flotilla, whose presence deterred further predation, despite Commodore Thomas Matthews’ pursuit of personal profit.

Wilson demonstrates that British responses to piracy were driven by London-based lobby groups representing the Newfoundland Fisheries, the East India Company, and the slave trade. At the time, the expansion of royal authority, especially in the Bahamas where former privateer Woodes Rogers became the Governor in a project funded by City investors, and not the Government, closed a critical ungoverned space in pursuit of economic interests. Although the number of ships deployed to the Colonies increased after 1721, the most important state contribution to controlling piracy appears to have been when Parliament changed the law in the early 1720s to prevent naval officers trading on their own account, and treat those who colluded with pirates, like colonial agents, and merchants handling their prizes, as pirates, subject to capital punishment. These measures reduced opportunities for corruption. Piracy is a crime, punishable by law, and the law proved to be the most effective weapon. As Wilson stresses, the government of Sir Robert Walpole minimised the use and display of naval force, actively working with other states, including France, against the pirate challenge. Walpole had no desire to make ‘war’ on the high seas. The growth of the London Shipping Insurance Market, and Colonial underwriters reduced risks. The last petitions for Government action against pirates came in 1724. With few rewards to offset the increasing risk of capture most pirates drifted out of the business.

By the late 1720s the primary threat to British shipping in the Caribbean came from Spanish *guarda costas*, self-funded privateers employed to impose nebulous imperial economic regulations. *Guarda costa* predation, evidently supported at a high level in Madrid, hampered British trade in the Caribbean until the War of Jenkins' Ear began in 1739. This subject has long needed scholarly attention.

The British response to this upsurge of piracy reflected the deep maritime roots of national power.⁷ The state provided some assets, and changed the legal basis of the response, but Colonial, and private enterprise organisations carried a major share of the burden. Risks were spread through large companies, and marine insurance. This period of piracy became a cultural phenomenon, generating a wide range of outputs, which have remained their potency to this day. Wilson's book undermines the romance of larceny at sea, and interpretations centred on the ubiquity of the early Georgian state.

Andrew Lambert
King's College, London

Paul A. Rahe. *Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta 478-446 B.C.* New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-300-24261-4. Pp. ix, 314; maps, illustrations. Hardcover: £25.00/ \$38.00.

&

Paul A. Rahe. *Sparta's Second Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta 446-418 B.C.* New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-300-24262-1. Pp. xvii, 384; maps, illustrations. Hardcover: £30.00/ \$40.00.

Paul Rahe's two books on Spartan grand strategy are part of a broader

⁷ For a useful comparison with later responses to similar challenges, see Andrew Lambert: 'British Responses to Piracy in the Nineteenth Century', in Edward R. Lucas, Samuel Rivera-Paez, Thomas Crosbie & Felix Falck Jensen (eds.), *Maritime Security: Counter-Terrorism Lessons from Maritime Piracy to Narcotics Interdiction* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2020; NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme, 2020), pp. 77-96.