

**Book Review:**  
**“Atlantic Piracy in the Early Nineteenth Century:  
The Shocking Story of the Pirates and the Survivors of the Morning Star”**

**Sarah Craze**

Boydell Press of Boydell & Brewer Ltd, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk, IP12 3DF, UK

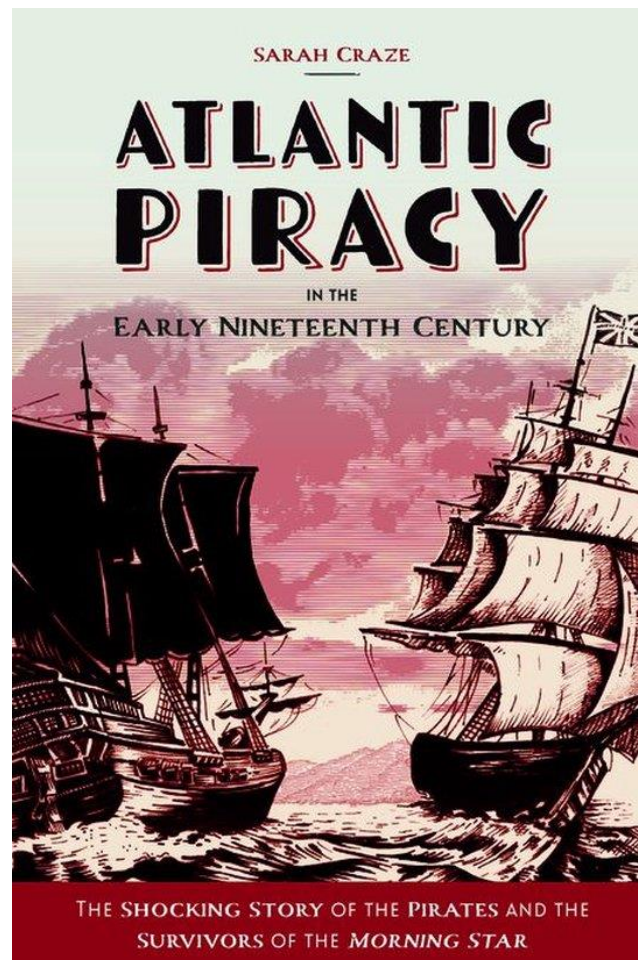
ISBN: 978 1 78327 6707

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International Journal of Maritime Crime and Security



Popular culture seems to have convinced us that pirates are exciting romantic figures, swashbuckling men of the sea, with legendary mysticism and appeal. For as long as trade has been conducted by sea, pirates (by whatever name they were called) have been plundering ships and raiding coastal communities. The image of pirates has been manipulated for many reasons; Homer's hero Achilles in the Iliad is believed by some scholars to have been a pirate, because of the author's distrust of merchants. Key figures of the ancient world, including Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar reportedly had run-ins with pirates that have been mythologized through the ages. Having said this, it wasn't until 1982 with the publication of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), that an internationally agreed definition for piracy was agreed on. It is not at all surprising therefore, that the meaning of the words pirate and piracy have taken on many forms.

Pirates and piracy stories have also been unbelievably lucrative. The franchise for Walt Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean has grossed over USD 4.5 billion worldwide for the media giant. Unless you have experienced the realities of a pirate attack you are more likely to look upon pirate characters favorably than unfavorably.

Sarah Craze's<sup>1</sup> book *Atlantic Piracy in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Shocking Story of the Pirates and the Survivors of the Morning Star* takes a very different approach. It is unashamedly objective and frank, providing a more believable account of these sea raiders than others have provided. She uses the attack on the *Morning Star*, a bark<sup>2</sup> in February 1828 in the mid-Atlantic, as her core case study throughout the book, using the details of the event as a vehicle to explore and expose the realities of life at sea, the brutality and realism of piracy, the inconsistencies of the law and its practice and how the press at the time manipulated stories for their own commercial gain. Craze also investigates with detective-like determination what happened to women onboard ships attacked by pirates and specifically the pirates that boarded the *Morning Star*. In the opinion of the reviewer, Craze provides a dispassionate and forensic analysis of the physical and psychological effects on the victims and highlights the societal disregard of sexual crimes against women. This is a refreshing, if bittersweet account, of the often-overlooked harshness of life at sea two hundred years ago in what we refer to as the "Golden Age of Sail".

The book comprises eight chapters, with 2 maps and 8 sketch portraits of key personalities. Evidence of the author's research is abundant with hundreds of footnotes often providing a concise explanation of the narrative and insights on how things were done at the time. The selected bibliography provides an extensive list of publications referred to and excellent sources for those who may wish to dig deeper into this fascinating case, along with a detailed index.

The first chapter looks at the way in which Captain Magnus Johnson of the pirated ship, *Morning Star* sparks a media storm when it arrived in Deal, Kent on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1828 almost two months after the pirate attack. Johnson immediately went ashore in search of the Lloyd's (ship insurers) representative to give him the news about the attack<sup>3</sup>. Craze follows both the official path of the news about the ship's attack and the way in which the newspapers transmitted the news of a pirate attack on a British ship. As the author explains, tales of piracy make good stories and sell papers. "For 150 years ...writers, poets, and artists had rationalised pirates' violence as driven by adventure and opportunity, rather than greed and profit."<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Craze PhD is an independent researcher who is the author of the Instagram page "piracyinpictures" which was reviewed in IJMCS, Vol 2, Issue 2 Maritime crime, and security resources online.

<sup>2</sup> Three masted, square rigged general purpose commercial ship.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst newspapers were being published in 1828, circulation was limited, the most popular paper, the *Morning Post* sold only around 4,000 copies nationally. Lloyd's List a publication focused on shipping and the movement of trade, had been in publication since 1734 and had established primacy across the maritime industry.

<sup>4</sup> *Atlantic Piracy*, Sarah Craze, 2022, p2

romanticisation of piracy had been triggered by the publication of Alexander O. Exquemelin's book *Americaensche Zee-Rovers* (American Sea Rovers) in 1678, originally published in Dutch, but quickly translated and published in other languages, which were adapted to extoll the virtues of pirates of the nation for which the book was published and neglect to mention any misdemeanors they may have committed. The author follows the way in which these stories sparked a public demand for tales of piracy and publishers took advantage of the demand. Craze follows the publisher feeding frenzy of exploiting pirates and piracy, taking us up to some of the best known and well-loved classics including *A General History of the Pyrates* (written by a different Captain Johnson – probably a pseudonym), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Whilst the "Golden Age of Piracy" (1650-1730) in the Caribbean was long over, piracy across the Atlantic Ocean was active. An uncluttered map marks the positions of the twenty plus attacks by pirates and privateers reported to the British Press between November 1827 and May 1828 as the pirates exploited the weakening influence of the Spanish across their former colonial empire. The *Morning Star* was a casualty of the Cisplantine war between Brazil and the government of Buenos Ayres.

Whilst the author describes how the story of the *Morning Star* spreads across England and Europe the author paints a picture of the complexities of Atlantic trade at this time, shortly before the abolition of slavery by the British as well as some of the challenges faced by nations attempting to manage this unstable, situation. The first chapter also gives the reader an appreciation of the authors holistic and objective style and her keenness to provide societal context of the time and situational perspective of the different incidents she describes, without any sensationalism or flamboyancy, the living conditions on board a square-rigged sailing ship to a Spanish court room.

She builds her main story of the *Morning Star*, by telling some of the personal stories of the crew and passengers on board, highlighting differences in the social mores of the time, which avoided any significant mention of the way women passengers were anonymized rather than named like the male crew and passengers.

In the second chapter she focuses on the day the pirates attacked the ship, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1828. Having described in detail the conditions on board, state of the crew and attitude of the ship owners, who as Quakers with "pacifist principles" refused to arm the ship against pirates relying on the skill of the captain and crew to outsail and outwit any sea rovers.

Shortly before the ship was attacked, she passed within sight of Ascension Island, an isolated volcanic atoll about 1,000 nautical miles south of Sierra Leone and was noticed and recorded by the British Garrison Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Nicolls. My only point of contention with the author is mistakenly referring to Lieutenant Colonel Nicolls as commander of "a small garrison of British soldiers on Ascension Island", whereas Nicolls was a distinguished (which the author recognises) former Royal Navy officer, serving as a Royal Marine at the time, with a detachment of marines on the island<sup>5</sup>, but this is an insignificant transgression.

The pursuit of the *Morning Star* and her boarding are described in detail from the sailing characteristics of the pirate's vessel compared to the target ship, providing accounts from crew and passengers about the raid. After the pirates departed with their plunder, expecting the ship to flounder, the author provides a vivid description of how those left onboard valiantly were able to maintain the seaworthiness of the vessel and get her to England.

The third chapter examines the emotive and sensitive subject of how women were treated at sea including the sexual violence they were subjected to. This chapter is revelatory and objective, providing

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<sup>5</sup> The reviewer is a former Royal Marine officer who has worked on Ascension Island.

incisive observations about the harsh realities' women were confronted with, and understanding the "only options were uniquely female."<sup>6</sup>, with a fascinating contemporary insight from extensive research conducted by a psychologist on women in potential rape situations and how they can rationalise their decisions to survive and protect others. The author provides an outstanding set of observations that unashamedly breach conventional conservatism and misogynistic avoidance of the most brutal of crimes conducted against women. It is also daunting to understand, in the twenty-first century, quite how primitive, ignorant, and unjust the law was in its pursuance of justice. In the reviewer's opinion this chapter provides an outstanding perspective, adding an unspoken dimension to the brutality of piracy.

Chapter 4 seeks to banish further the perceived romanticism of piracy and privateering and demonstrate the narrow difference between the two and how many nations used privateers to be opportunistic on their behalf, whilst ensuring the crimes, which proved extremely lucrative, were not attributable to the instigators. The flying of "flags of convenience" were commonplace as part of the deceptive arsenal of pirate ships and prospective target alike. Trade between the Americas and the Caribbean was brisk attracting buccaneers, state, and non-state, to ply their scurrilous trade. The latter part of the chapter looks at the way in which naval cooperation became more effective against the scourge of Atlantic piracy.

In Chapter 5 the author looks at the geopolitics of the world in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Trade between the imperial powers in Europe and the Americas across the Atlantic was profitable for the Europeans. South American states were gaining independence from their colonial powers and neighboring countries were jockeying for power and influence in several ways including the Cisplantine war. The old colonial methods of using black African slaves to provide the labour to enrich the landowners was attracting more scrutiny and in 1807 the British parliament enacted the Slave Trade Act stopping the use of slaves within the British Empire. Whilst this act was unsuccessful in banning slavery outside the UK and only had limited success across the British Empire, it did signal the turning of the tide and allowed Britain to put pressure on Atlantic trading partners with regards to their own slavery legislation. The author describes how all these changes fueled sufficient ambiguity for piracy and privateering become a significant problem. She also recounts how conditions for seafarers on board ships were often dire, engendering an atmosphere where "the milk of human kindness was not a prominent feature."<sup>7</sup> pushing many sailors to become pirates. Within this context she builds the scene of what was happening on the pirate ship that attacked the *Morning Star*.

Whilst pirates could ply their skullduggery across the oceans, they could only stay at sea for so long, which was one of their key vulnerabilities. They needed safe ports to visit so they could liquidate their treasure, rest, and recuperate from time at sea and reprovision their ships before returning to pursue their criminal activities. Craze looks at the network of safe ports and how trade was conducted to the advantage of the port's businessmen. Most of these ports were far from their colonial power's seat of government and therefore out of sight, and often out of mind, allowing the authorities to adapt their business practices and relax compliance with legislation. There were also coastal communities of the sovereign state that were detached from central government which were very opportunistic when the situation presented itself. However, ports did not always provide the sanctuary anticipated, especially if people were not discreet in their dealing with the ship and crew. Following the story of the attack on the *Morning Star* and the fate of the pirates that attacked her, Craze's detective like research provides the evidence that leads to the captain

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<sup>6</sup> Atlantic Piracy, Sarah Craze, 2022, p55

<sup>7</sup> Atlantic Piracy, Sarah Craze, 2022, p90

– Benito de Soto, along with his ship the *Defensor de Pedro* and the crew being identified, caught, and put on trial in Cadiz, Spain.

The court case in Spain “generated more than 4,000 pages of witness testimony and documentary evidence.”<sup>8</sup> giving Craze lots of material to examine and providing an accurate and entertaining account of the trial. Craze uses the case study to provide vignettes about the characteristics of other pirate trials conducted by different judicial systems and their typical outcomes.

In the final chapter of the book the author provides accounts of some of the pirates who continued to pirate and privateer well into the nineteenth century, especially along the North American coast, taking advantage of opportunities provided by the American Civil War. The book comes to rest as sailing ships begin to be replaced by iron hulled ships powered by steam, using the screw propellor, meaning voyage times across the Atlantic Ocean became far more predictable in vessels that weren’t subject to wind and sail making them much harder targets to attack.

In her Epilogue, Craze reflects on the whole tale and picks up on the threads that exist for those that survived the pirate attack on the *Morning Star* and how they lived out the rest of their days.

This entertaining and meticulously researched book provides a dispassionate and objective account of piracy in the early nineteenth century along with a balanced insight on the way in which various nations dealt with the scourge of piracy and privateering. The author’s frank and sensitive handling of the way women were treated reveals a shameful attitude of the past to the contemporary reader. This book raises important questions that are not usually addressed and exposes the harsh realities of the time and challenges the romanticized portrait of piracy. Her explanations of the way women were treated has added great authenticity that only a woman could bring to the subject with openness, compassion, and intelligence. This excellent book goes some way to counterbalance the fictitious and deceitful accounts, written by many of her predecessors, designed to support a lucrative and self-serving myth.

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Peter Cook  
30 June 2023

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<sup>8</sup> Atlantic Piracy, Sarah Craze, 2022, p140