

Guy Chet.

*The Ocean is a Wilderness: Atlantic Piracy and the Limits of State Authority, 1688-1856*

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014, 178 pp. \$ 80.00

In his book, *The Ocean is a Wilderness*, Guy Chet challenges the traditional narrative of maritime and British imperial history which states that the rise of the British empire, and subsequent anti-piracy campaigns, brought a swift end to piracy, bringing order to the Atlantic by 1730. Instead, he argues that the Atlantic continued to be essentially a “wild west” during the eighteenth century, just as it had been in the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries. Chet argues that the Atlantic did not conform to the British state, that British imperial power remained unable to enforce state authority over commerce and that the eventual decline in piracy in the Atlantic is due to changes in the economy that were completely unrelated to anti-piracy campaigns. Chet bases much of this argument on the idea that the ocean should be seen as a “wilderness” or as a “frontier” in which local customs and traditions outweighed state authority and legislative power, an argument that would place the ocean within the realm of borderland studies. In the case of the Atlantic, Chet argues that peripheral communities not only did not implement anti-piracy regulations, but supported illegal trade, not because they rejected the central government’s authority but because they held on to the tradition that maritime commerce was outside of the jurisdiction of the state.

In the preface Chet states that he had originally set out to write the history of how the British Navy rose in power and effectively ended the pirate trade by 1730. However, instead of finding evidence of naval victories and the suppression of piracy, he found a pattern of frustrated, ineffective policing and accommodation. Thus, his research led him to discover the frustrated efforts of the Board of Trade, local courts, marine insurance underwriters and customs agents to enforce British anti-piracy policy, and to discover a gap in the historiography, one which covers the public’s reaction to the authorities’ attempts to enforce a mercantile system and thus “civilize” the Atlantic. To fill in this gap, and effectively present his analysis of Britain’s anti-piracy campaign, Chet draws from a wide range of historiography, pulling together maritime, economic, imperial and legal historiographies. Chet brings a wealth of knowledge regarding the British Atlantic together to effectively analyze the treatment of Britain’s anti-piracy campaigns and the establishment of the mercantile trade system by the leading historiography. This treatment is then compared to the evidence Chet brings forth from his extensive research in England’s National Archives and to the evidence left behind by localized principalities. Chet utilizes an impressive range of primary sources to determine not only the effectiveness of British policy, but to also determine the local attitudes towards these policies. These sources are then synthesized into a concise discussion of the pervasiveness of piracy and illicit trade in the British Atlantic.

Chet begins his discussion by evaluating the traditional narrative regarding piracy in the eighteenth century and the rise of British naval power. Chet quickly identifies a few key flaws in this traditional narrative. Chet points to the multiple Parliamentary acts against piracy as a sign of continued predation, not a sign of strengthening suppression, arguing that if the state were successful in implementing the anti-piracy acts, then the number of complaints would decrease,

and the need to enact more acts against piracy would cease. While he does acknowledge that there are multiple, well publicized accounts of naval success against pirates, he argues that one should not read too much into these accounts, pointing out that similar successes occurred before and during the “golden age” of piracy and did not reduce piracy. Instead of being reduced, he argues, armed commerce was common and even expected during the eighteenth century.

Chet builds on this idea when he presents the argument that, contrary to what many scholars of piracy claim, the era after the Glorious Revolution did not see a rise in nationalism. Rather, there was a continuation of a decentralized system as the British Atlantic experienced what has come to be known as a period of “salutary neglect.” This decentralized atmosphere allowed the idea that the Ocean was beyond the power of the courts to continue even into the nineteenth century. Chet argues that a campaign against piracy would have amounted to a campaign against the commercial habits and moral beliefs of much of the common populace. He points out that much of the economic practice of the British Atlantic, at this time, was based on smuggling and contraband trade, and that the state was ineffective in suppressing these activities. Thus, local principalities would have put local loyalties first and protected their traditional economic practices. They would not have, and did not, enforce the state’s anti-piracy policies.

One of the main objections Chet makes to the traditional narrative is the projecting backwards of a modern definition of piracy. Chet argues that historians, by using a modern distinction between piracy and privateers, have effectively argued that the close of the seventeenth century saw a dramatic suppression of piracy and rise in privateers, thus ending piracy in the Atlantic, when in reality, this distinction is a legalistic one that held no practical bearing on eighteenth century pirates, as many pirates would cross this line haphazardly. However, modern historians have relied heavily on legal documentation to make their argument, accepting Parliamentary distinctions and rulings as evidence of the suppression of piracy, when local communities around the Atlantic did not see this distinction and often did not enforce the laws being passed in Parliament. This is a theme that Chet repeatedly brings up, as the rise in the number of privateers is often used by historians as evidence of a shift away from piracy to legalized privateering during the eighteenth century.

Once Chet has established his argument that using legalistic arguments to prove the suppression of piracy when local communities show no evidence of supporting the anti-piracy campaign is inherently flawed, Chet moves on to address the use of insurance rates to prove the suppression of piracy. Chet challenges the argument that because merchants sought insurance against pirates, it can be assumed they supported the state’s efforts to regulate commerce and suppress piracy. He points to the fact that piracy stimulated local economies, and that merchants often profited from acts of piracy, either by acquiring goods at lower prices when pirates sold their prizes, or through their insurance policies should they fall victim to pirate attacks. Chet argues that there is little to no evidence to suggest that merchants in general supported anti-piracy campaigns. Rather, it was the insurance underwriters who petitioned Parliament for reform and regulation. The fact that merchants maintained a traditional view of maritime commerce as being armed commerce is reflected in Chet’s discussion of smuggling.

Scholarship regarding smuggling is, Chet argues, more reflective of the conflicting ethical and ideological frameworks that informed commercial and governmental attitudes in the eighteenth century. However, Chet argues, there is very little difference in the ideologies that allowed for the continuation of smuggling and those that allowed for, and even supported, piracy. Thus, a study of the success and eventual decline of smuggling in the British Atlantic can inform scholarship on the eventual decline of piracy. Chet states that smuggling and piracy

declined during the latter half of the eighteenth century due to new economic and commercial conditions that eventually made such practices unnecessary. As the Navigation Acts proved ineffective at curbing what had become termed as “free trade,” and as custom agents found it nearly impossible to uphold the Acts in their ports, Parliament eventually gave into the pleas of the “fair traders” who tried to follow the laws, and lowered the tariffs. The reduction of tariffs made smuggling an unnecessary occupation and lowered the profitability of piracy. Thus, Chet argues, it was the reduction of tariffs, which was the product of the failure of the state to enforce its laws, that led to the reduction of piracy in the Atlantic, not the increase of state authority and power over the ocean.

Throughout this short book Guy Chet challenges many of the assumptions that have governed historians of piracy and maritime history in the Atlantic. Chet brings a wealth of knowledge together and succinctly presents his argument, offering a quick analysis of the historiographical trends that have governed the traditional narrative, while pointing out what he sees as the flaws of these trends and offering arguments that contradict the traditional narrative. While Chet’s research is extensive, he does not go into detail explaining his evidence when offering his counter arguments. Most of his arguments are made by summarizing his own conclusions without presenting the reader with a detailed summary of the evidence he has found. Chet’s arguments would be made stronger by a more detailed discussion of the evidence, however, this would take away from the streamlined discussion he is trying to present. This absence of detailed descriptions of the evidence he has found might prove frustrating to some readers, while inspiring others to investigate his sources and thus inspire new research. Despite the lack of a detailed discussion of his evidence, Chet’s discussion is sure to inspire future discussions and challenge historians to ask new questions. This book, which challenges the bulk of maritime historiography of Atlantic piracy in the eighteenth century, is sure to become an important contribution to our understanding of piracy and the state’s ability to enforce its policy on the Atlantic.

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