

## **The Not so Disadvantageous Exploits of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Pirate**

For centuries, trade has been of major importance to the economy of many European countries. In the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> century, this means of exchange grew excessively as the Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, and Dutch established colonies in the West Indies, which were rich with gold, linen, cotton, and various provisions. Thus they started transporting cargoes of foreign products to Europe; merchants laden with valuables crossed the ocean, a journey that did not necessarily turn out successful. The seas and oceans were full of danger. Not only could a ship be surprised by unexpected shoals, storms, or hurricanes; the fact that these ships often sailed unprotected drew the attention of those who were eager to obtain treasure illegally: pirates. As long as there has been trade, these *buccaneers* have been present to seize ships and take them as their prize. As trade increased, pirates did too, and it was therefore that several European colonies in the Caribbean became dens of pirates. Halfway the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Tortuga and Jamaica were infamous for their ports, where vagabonds repaired and used the harbour as a base to plunder passing ships. The “great age of piracy” (1650-1725) (Cordingly xvi) especially marks the strain between England and Spain; for English pirates most eagerly preyed on Spanish ships, which had long dominated the Caribbean waters. In that time, it was not uncommon for pirates to receive commissions from governors to attack certain ports or ships. Especially the governor of Tortuga and governor Modyford of Jamaica were known for giving commissions to pirates, acts that often resulted in attacks on Spanish ships and towns. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the act of piracy and privateering of English sailors in the West Indies was condoned by governor Modyford of Jamaica. This threatened the peace between England and Spain.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Spain dominated the Caribbean. While these foreign waters were of relatively small interest to other

European countries, the Spaniards made expeditions to explore Central America, and eventually started to establish settlements. This began with the island Hispaniola, which was “rich in people, in food, [and] in agricultural potential” (Andrews 4). Many settlements followed in Central and South America. “Gold was of course the main attraction to the Spaniards. Gold they sought from the first, craving it, pursuing it obsessively” (Andrews 6). Thus, numerous ships laden with gold returned to Spain to enrich its economy, something that did not go unnoticed to the rest of Europe. The riches the Spaniards brought back with them made other countries eager to do the same, and it would not take long for them to make similar expeditions.

In 1655, the English colonised Jamaica during Oliver Cromwell’s mission to “carve out for England a Protestant empire in the Indies” (Earle 91). The Spanish colony Hispaniola proved too difficult to capture, but Jamaica was to be a good alternative. Although it was not located as centrally as Hispaniola, Jamaica was a good base for English merchants and expeditions of trade. Moreover, the colony breached Spain’s dominating position in the Caribbean. While the Spaniards used to have free passage in that area, the establishment of the English was to become a major competitor and “the very worst enemy of Spain in the Indies” (Earle 91). Even though peace was signed between England and Spain in 1660, it was prohibited for the English to enter Spanish harbours or to trade with them, a prohibition that provoked hate towards the Spanish.

Not only did English merchants inhabit Jamaica; the colony soon became popular to pirates, as the island lay advantageous towards seafaring routes and the buccaneers could easily prey on ships. Port Royal had a fine harbour, and the more pirates used it as a base, the more wealth was brought to the island. For as soon as the sea robbers came on shore, the treasure they had captured was spent on provisions, repairs, and entertainment in the town.

Whereas pirates were feared greatly by merchants, governor Modyford of Jamaica welcomed them on the island. Earle remarks that “[t]he governors of

Jamaica and Tortuga for their part believed that privateering had many advantages, providing as it did employment for some very rough men, profits from fitting out and victualling the privateers' ships, a stream of prizes to be sold cheaply in their markets and an effective and costless naval defence against counter-attack by the Spaniards" (92). Besides a defence, the pirates proved useful in missions against the Spaniards. Although England and Spain were at peace, it did not mean that there were no hostilities between the countries in the Caribbean. The phrase "no peace beyond the line" was often pronounced. Earle remarks that this line marks the longitude that passes through the Azores, and that only the rule of force counts beyond that line, namely the force of pirates and privateers (92).

Commissions, also known as Letters of Marque, were given to pirates and contained instructions from the governor, making them sail as *privateers*. These instructions were given for the benefit of the English colony, as they often contained permission to attack enemies or enemy ports. Pirates were usually glad to sail under the protection of the governor. The commissions they carried with them protected them against prosecutions for their deeds, and they often used them for their own benefit. A good example is that of a famous buccaneer who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, namely Henry Morgan, who never sailed without a commission from the governor.

In spite of the peace between England and Spain, governor Modyford seemed to encourage Henry Morgan's hostilities against Spanish ships and settlements in the West Indies. In 1668, the governor sent Morgan a ship, the *Oxford*, "to encourage him still further to attack some place of consequence, where there would be good plunder" (Exquemelin 141). Although it is not explicitly mentioned, it can be concluded that this "place of consequence" refers to a Spanish town or harbour. This ship was sent to Morgan right after he captured the Spanish town Portobello, a deed that was well received in London. Cordingly emphasizes that the capture of Portobello delighted the citizens of

London after the Fire of London and the Great Plague. Although the Spanish ambassador made complaints, King Charles refused to recall the governor of Jamaica (48). Even the authorities in London did not condemn the actions of a pirate.

Morgan's capture of Maracaibo in 1669 was defended by the King just as easily. Again the Spanish Court made complaints, but, as Exquemelin narrates, "the King replied that he had never given commissions for any hostility to be employed against the subjects of His Catholic Majesty" (Exquemelin 158). It is rather dubious that, when Morgan returned from this expedition, he received news from governor Modyford. The letter he had received from Lord Arlington ordered that hostilities against Spain had to be ceased. This might have been to appease the Spaniards, who were enraged after two serious attacks on their colonies.

The Spaniards, however, could not be defused easily this time. Morgan's attacks on Portobello and Maracaibo were of such a serious degree that the treaty between England and Spain of 1667 had been violated. In this treaty, it was agreed that Letters of Marque could only be provided if they were for just purposes. Barbour relates that "a subject of one of the contracting states, wronged by subjects of the other, must first seek redress through the medium of law; if justice were refused him there, his king might bring the matter before the deputies of commissioners of the king of the offending state" (Barbour 553). Thus the Spanish ambassador made serious complaints and demanded redress for the loss Henry Morgan had caused on the Spanish colonies.

For the English it became more and more difficult to defend their actions, for it could not be denied that the treaty had been violated. Even though governor Modyford was held responsible for Morgan's exploits, England did not admit that the governor had acted wrongly. Barbour writes that the answer to the complaints of the Spanish ambassador "refused to discuss specific offences or promise restitution, but covered the whole issue with the statement that the king's

subjects did not enjoy peace in the Indies” (Barbour 558). This statement can be seen as a reaction to the plans of Spanish colonist to attack Jamaica. During Morgan’s attack on Puerto Principe, preparations for such an attack were found, and Barbour narrates that governor Modyford used Spain’s plan to conquer Jamaica as a reason for Morgan’s sack of Portobello. The governor continued defending himself by sending a letter to the Spanish ambassador, which said that Spain should be glad that the privateers carried English commissions and not French, which would have been far worse (558).

Since the Spanish had not actually attacked Jamaica, the defence of the English seems weak. The retaliation of Spain was therefore a logical consequence. Soon the governor of Cuba received a letter that authorised war against the English. The Portuguese corsair Captain Rivero instantly made use of it by raiding the Cayman Islands, after which he set out to Jamaica. “In June 1670 he landed thirty men at Montego Bay on Jamaica’s north coast and destroyed most of the houses in the settlement. A month later he raided a coastal village on the south coast and burned two houses” (Cordingly 50). Now that the defence of Jamaica had been threatened, Modyford took action by providing Morgan with a Letter of Marque. As a reaction on these hostilities against Jamaica, Modyford made Morgan Admiral of his fleet and gave him the following instructions:

“[T]o put to Sea for the Guard and Defence of this island, and of all vessels trading to or about the same; and in order thereunto to use your best endeavours to surprise, take, sink, disperse, and destroy all the enemies ships or vessels which shall come within your view, and also for preventing the intended Invasion against this place, you are hereby further authorised and required, in the case that you and your Officers in your Judgement find it possible, or feasible to land and attain the said own of St. Jago de Cuba, or any other

place belonging to the Enemies, where you shall be informed that Magazines and Stores for this War are laid up, or where any Rendezvous for their Forces to Imbody are appointed and there to use your best endeavours for the seizing the said Stores, and to take, kill, and disperse the said Forces” (Malthus).

In De Americaensche Zeeroovers, Alexander O. Exquemelin<sup>1</sup> gives an account of Morgan’s exploits, which consist of many cruelties this pirate committed under the protection of the governor’s commissions. By Exquemelin’s accounts, it can be concluded that – in spite of the governor’s instructions – the privateers often chose their own goals to aim for. The most famous expedition is the sacking of Panama in 1670, a mission that was set up by the buccaneers themselves. Exquemelin narrates that

“Morgan held a council of war with the ships’ captains to decide where first to attack. It was proposed that they attack one of these three places: Cartagena, Panama or Vera Cruz. There was no argument about whether the buccaneer force was sufficient, or which place was most strongly defended – none of the three was as rich as Panama and therefore by common consent it was decided that this should be the main goal to attack and plunder” (Exquemelin 173).

Thus the buccaneers benefited from the governor’s commission, which gave them protection against prosecution. They could freely attack said enemy “Rendezvous,” and the booty was to be shared among Morgan’s men. Exquemelin gives a complete summary of the share each privateer was to receive, and it becomes clear that no money went to the governor. Jamaica benefited from Morgan’s actions because the sack of Panama was a stab against

the enemy (Spain), and the plunder the pirates shared among themselves could only benefit to the island's economy.

The entire expedition, however, was a reaction against the Treaty of Madrid of 1670. Burney states the entire list of agreements, which were to cease hostilities between England and Spain and to put an end to the exploits of the buccaneers (Burney 72). This means that the phrase "no peace beyond the line" would no longer be applicable, if the countries indeed kept to the treaty. In the treaty the English colonies were recognised and both countries would freely make use of their own ports, yet trade between the English and Spanish was still prohibited. The fact that the Spanish retained their dominating position caused the English sailors to hate the Spaniards. Earle states that foreign seamen were treated as pirates by the Spanish, which usually resulted in them being executed or imprisoned (96). Morgan's expedition to sack Panama can be seen as a protest against these measures. Burney emphasizes this: "[w]hen notice of this treaty was received in the West Indies the buccaneers immediately as of one accord resolved to undertake some grand expedition" (Burney 73). The narrative continues with an account of the sacking of Panama by Henry Morgan under the protection of the governor's Letter of Marque.

The sacking of Panama could, of course, not be without consequences. The fact that a pirate had been the cause of the destruction of Panama caused the Queen of Spain to be "in such distemper and excesse of weeping and violent passion as those about her feared it might shorten her life" (qtd. in Cordingly 54). Since England and Spain were officially at peace, this deed could not be easily defended by the English Crown. Whereas former deeds by buccaneers had been condoned by the authorities in London, Morgan's sacking of Panama could not be dealt with so easily. Governor Modyford had not been allowed to give Morgan a commission to attack the Spaniards and the whole event threatened the peace between England and Spain.

It was not easy to defuse Spain in the matter, especially because governor Modyford knew about the Treaty of Madrid at the time Morgan was about to sack Panama under his commission. Haring describes that “the greatest tact and prudence” was needed to restore the relationship between England and Spain, “until an official disavowal of the expedition came from England, [and] an immediate embargo on all the goods of English merchants in Spain” (Haring 199). With this, the Spanish Crown seemed to have calmed down, for the records show no ensuing war between England and Spain.

The reactions of England are dubious. Both Earle and Cordingly claim that Morgan was highly praised for his deeds, especially in Jamaica, but also in London. Modyford was thanked openly by his brother, who remarked that they now had their revenge on the Spaniards, who had burned houses on Jamaica in 1670 (Cordingly 53). At the same time, Sir Thomas Lynch was sent to Jamaica to arrest governor Modyford and Henry Morgan, who were both sent to London. Modyford was brought to the Tower of London, but was released two years later. Cordingly rightly claims that the whole action of him being arrested was to appease the Spanish Crown (54). It is remarkable that a person sent to the Tower was allowed to leave it and to continue a respectable life in London. Morgan was never prosecuted; the governor’s commission protected him against such measures. The fact that he was knighted by the King and later in his life received the commission of deputy governor of Jamaica only confirms that the English condoned his former actions.

It might be possible that the arrest of Modyford and Morgan and the Treaty of Madrid gave Spain hope on better times. With the new governor in Jamaica no commissions were dealt to pirates anymore. Thomas Lynch, however, announced a general pardon for privateers and offered each a piece of land if they decided to become planters. Those who preferred a life at sea soon came to the conclusion that Jamaica had lost its benefits for pirates, so they sought safe ports on other islands.



In conclusion, it can be stated that piracy was condoned by governor Modyford of Jamaica in the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the cover of so-called *privateering*, and that the British Crown acted dubiously during various affairs in which English privateers committed hostilities against the Spanish Crown. In spite of the official peace between England and Spain, a continuous war was going on in the Caribbean between English buccaneers and Spanish colonists. The Spaniards valued their dominating position in the West Indies too much to allow the English to use their harbours, which in turn invoked hate among the English. For that reason, it can be stated that the English authorities were lenient with prosecuting English pirates like Henry Morgan, whose actions were actually to the benefit of the English Crown. “[T]he continual pressure was the best method of encouraging Spain to recognise their de facto colonies in the Indies and ideally allow their traders to break into lucrative Spanish colonial markets which were maintained as a monopoly for Spaniards” (Earle 93). Therefore, the English rather praised Henry Morgan for capturing Portobello, Maracaibo, and Panama, and can the arrests of him and governor Modyford and an official disavowal of the English crown be seen as measures to avoid war with Spain. Although the records describe the enragement of the Spaniards at the sack of Panama, war did not break out. The agreements of the Treaty of Madrid proved their purpose after a new governor had been installed on Jamaica and no commissions were provided to pirates anymore.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>As an eyewitness of Morgan's deeds, Exquemelin's account is the most elaborate of Morgan's actions. Although it is debatable whether or not certain passages are exaggerated or biased, Exquemelin's account is nonetheless the most important source available about Henry Morgan's marauding.

**Sources:**

**Primary:**

Exquemelin, Buccaneers of America. Trans. Alexis Brown. Unabridged Dover, 2000.

Malthus, Thomas. Sir Henry Morgan's Voyage to Panama. Londres, 1683.

**Secondary:**

Andrews, Kenneth R. The Spanish Caribbean: Trade and Plunder 1530-1630. Yale University Press New Haven and London, 1978.

Barbour, Violet. "Privateers and Pirates of the West Indies." The American Historical Review Vol.16, No.3. (Apr.,1911): 529-566.

Burney, History of the Buccaneers of America. Unabridged Dover (2002).

Cordingly, Under the Black Flag. Random House (2006).

Earle, The Pirate Wars. Methuen (2004).

Haring, C.H. The Buccaneers in the West Indies in the XVII Century. Archon Books Hamden, Connecticut, 1966.