

Book "Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates" by Robert Ritchie examines legend of Captain Kidd and pirate life

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HISTORIAN'S NEW BOOK EXAMINES THE LEGEND OF CAPTAIN KIDD AND PIRATE LIFE

Piracy in the 17th century and the career of Capt. William Kidd, perhaps history's most infamous pirate, are the subjects of a new book by University of California, San Diego history professor Robert C. Ritchie.

"Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates," is scheduled for publication by Harvard University Press October 24, and has already been named a feature selection by the History Book Club.

"It was a lot of fun to do the book and it gave me the opportunity to examine certain aspects of the European world economy, and then to look at the way in which that same economy was able to destroy the creature that it had created, namely, worldwide buccaneering," Ritchie said.

"I chose to study Capt. Kidd simply because we don't know much about most of the pirates who are famous," he added. "Kidd is the exception because he was in the public eye for about 10 years, he was involved with famous men, and there was a lot written about him in his lifetime."

Kidd, it turns out, was more an unwitting political pawn of British politicians than a bloodthirsty buccaneer, according to Ritchie.

Backed by several prominent British Whig politicians, Kidd, who had a reputation as an honest sea captain, was hired to fight piracy in the waters of the Indian Ocean off Madagascar. His backers presumed that if he was successful, he would return with a boatload of pirate booty and they would all be rich.

But when Kidd's ship reached Madagascar, he found he was badly outnumbered by the pirates, and sailed away. Not wanting to return home empty-handed, he captured a merchant ship which turned out to belong to the Indian government and was carrying goods for the British-owned East India Company.

This incident proved a major blunder for Kidd and an embarrassment for the British politicians who supported him. During an argument aboard his ship, Kidd also killed a seaman by hitting him on the head with a wooden bucket.

For his bumbling efforts, Kidd was branded a pirate and a murderer, eventually captured, and hanged in England in 1701 following a highly publicized trial.

The book also presents a thorough look at piracy and the pirates' life during the 17th century. Ritchie examines such questions as: What sort of men became pirates? What was life like aboard a pirate ship or in a pirate community? What brought about their downfall? And, of course, did they really bury treasure?

"I found the research fascinating, above all, the attempt to capture the genuine voice of the pirates, so that they were describing their own lives and not having other people describe it for them," said Ritchie. "There's been a lot of romanticism about this era and I got a big kick out of capturing the real past of the pirates."

As one might expect, pirates portrayed in Hollywood films are a far cry from the pirates of historical record, according to Ritchie. The life of a pirate was far from glamorous.

They lived a hard and dangerous existence with constant threats of injury, disease, or apprehension by authorities. Sea voyages were often long and boring. Many pirates had families, but spent years aboard ship and seldom saw them.

Surprisingly, piracy was a very democratic enterprise, with crew members often able to vote captains in or out of office depending upon their success, and casting votes to decide how to divide their riches.

And buried treasure?

"Forget it," says Ritchie.

"The idea of burying booty on a tropical island would have struck them as insane. The men who turned to piracy did so because they wanted money. As soon as possible after capturing a prize they insisted on dividing the loot," he writes.

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