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## The Pirate Apprentice

**E**veryone likes a bestseller. In 1724, booksellers in London couldn't stock enough copies of the latest rip-roaring success, a series of pirate yarns penned by the completely unknown sea captain, Charles Johnson. The publisher, Charles Rivington, was delighted, and immediately gave orders for the printing of a second edition, just to keep up with demand. The book contained a series of biographies of British-born or British colonial pirates whose deeds shocked and titillated the genteel readership and left them wanting more. Of the dozen or so pirates covered in the book, the most ferocious was a man the author called "Captain Teach." Today we know him as Blackbeard.

Even today Blackbeard remains something of an enigma. Like many pirates of his time, he only emerges from the historical mists when he crosses the line from law-abiding seaman to notorious pirate. This means that whatever follows about the pirate's early life includes a lot of supposition, a house of cards built on a shaky table. This said, we can make several

fairly logical guesses about what happened to him during these lost years. The few facts we have about him can also be augmented with other, more verifiable types of evidence. Much of what we do know is based on the writings of Captain Johnson, and one suspects that his version of Blackbeard's life was colored a little to make a more sensational story. However, Blackbeard's short but dramatic life left enough of a wake that with a little detective work we can trace his piratical career, filling in the gaps left by Johnson and breathing life into the alarming figure portrayed by the first pirate biographer.

The background of Captain Charles Johnson is almost as mysterious as that of Blackbeard himself. Before we dip our toe in the pirate-infested waters of the early eighteenth century, we need to look a little more closely at the man who single-handedly made piracy glamorous and who wrote the first piratical bestseller. What we really know about Captain Charles Johnson isn't enough to fill a paragraph in an eighteenth-century *Who's Who*. No such figure appears to exist, which suggests the name was a *nom de plume*. While the identity of the writer still remains a mystery, several candidates have been proposed over the last three centuries.

These include the mediocre London playwright Charles Johnson (1679–1748), the publisher Charles Rivington (1688–1742), and Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), the man who wrote *Robinson Crusoe*. In his introduction to a modern edition of Johnson's *A General History . . . of the most notorious Pyrates*, maritime historian David Cordingly quite convincingly argued that as a sedentary landlubber, the playwright lacked the background needed to write a book that was so atmospherically peppered with nautical jargon. Similarly, Rivington, who published the first edition of the book in 1724, was wedded to his profession, and never appears to have strayed far from his shop near St. Paul's Cathedral. Even a day trip to the beach would have been out of character for him.

Daniel Defoe was a different type of man altogether. The London-born newspaperman and author knew how to write sensational prose, which is exactly what Johnson's *A General History* was. In *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Captain Singleton* (1720), he demonstrated an extensive knowledge of the maritime world, and his style of writing was similar to that found in the pirate book. In his 1939 study *Defoe in the Pillory and Other Studies*, historian John R. Moore convincingly argued that Defoe and Johnson were one and the same, an association that remained in vogue for over half a

century. Then in 1988 P. N. Furbank and W. R. Owens published *The Canonisation of William Defoe*, where they equally effectively demolished Moore's argument. This leaves us without a strong candidate for Johnson.

What isn't in doubt is that whoever Captain Charles Johnson was, he was certainly an experienced seaman. His description of how sailing ships of the time were operated and how they performed, and of what conditions on board were like, all suggest that the author was not only well versed in seafaring, but that he also spoke with some authority. He also described sea battles like a grizzled veteran. This alone precludes Daniel Defoe, who, although he was well traveled, was no professional seaman. It has even been suggested that Johnson himself was a pirate, although no suitable candidate has appeared, nor has Johnson been identified with any experienced and well-read merchant or naval captain of the time.

He certainly seemed to understand the lot of the common sailors mentioned in his book, and at times he even appeared to take the side of the pirates themselves—something a naval or merchant captain would usually be loath to do. So far it appears that the author of *A General History* has successfully maintained the façade of his nom de plume, and both the author and the publisher took his real identity to the grave with them.

What we know about the book itself is a lot more tangible. Captain Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates* was published in May 1724, a simple little leather-bound octavo-sized book (about half of a letter-size sheet) by an unknown author. To our ears the title sounds clumsy, but by the standards of 1724 it was as racy as it got. It certainly found a market, because the first edition sold out within a few months. A third, and then an enlarged fourth edition followed in 1725 and 1726, and by 1734 the work had been repackaged to include accounts of highwaymen, murderers, and robbers as well as pirates. It has remained in print ever since.

The original edition included an account of the lives of Bartholomew Roberts, who died in battle just three years before in 1721, as well as the sensational story of the two women pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read and the lives of ten other pirates. One of these was entitled "The Life of Captain Teach." In the chapter, Johnson states, "Plutarch, and other grave historians, have taken notice that several great men amongst the Romans took their surnames from certain odd marks in their countenances; as Cicero, from a mark or vetch on his nose, so our hero Captain Teach,

assumes the cognomen of Blackbeard from that large quantity of hair which, like a frightful meteor, covered his whole face and frightened America more than any comet that has appeared there a long time.”

One of Johnson’s most notorious pirates had a nickname that caught the imagination of the public, and has remained at the forefront of piratical imagery ever since. By the time the book was published Blackbeard had been dead for six years, and the so-called Golden Age of Piracy was already over. The villains whose short and brutal lives were so vividly encapsulated by Captain Johnson were fast becoming larger-than-life characters, whose exploits entertained rather than alarmed. Their recent executions or grisly deaths provided readers with the thrilling association of recent history with the escapism provided by a series of events, locations, and circumstances that the average reader could hardly imagine, and would never experience. It is little wonder that Johnson’s book became such a popular work, and that his portrayal of Blackbeard and his contemporaries would remain equally vivid to later generations of readers.

The question is, how accurate was Johnson? How much were his short biographies based on fact, and how much was created to provide sensational reading? In his recent introduction to a reprint of Johnson, David Cordingly argued that in almost all cases the accuracy of Johnson’s facts has been borne out by subsequent historical research. In his introduction to a reprint of Johnson published in 1925, the pirate historian Philip Gosse wrote that “Many of the incidents looked upon as imaginary are found all to be absolutely accurate in date and circumstance.”

In 1998 Cordingly went even further, saying that “the majority of the facts in Johnson’s *History* have been proved to be accurate.” He did add the proviso that “there are a few notable exceptions. It seems likely that when he introduces conversation into his biographies he uses considerable licence.” A prime example of this is Johnson’s description of the exchange between Blackbeard and Lieutenant Maynard during the pirate’s final battle. While it sounds good, neither Maynard nor any other survivor of the battle mentioned any such exchange. There are a few other areas where Johnson gets it wrong, but we’ll come to those as the story unfolds. Suffice it to say Johnson provides a good starting point for our study, and gives us a framework on which to fix the many other scraps of historical information that make up the story of the pirate’s life and times.

That brings us back to Blackbeard. As the first real biographer of the

pirate, what did Johnson say about the pirate's identity, and his early life? In brief, the answer is surprisingly little. Considering that Blackbeard was one of the most notorious pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy, and one whose activities played such an important part in early colonial American history, surprisingly little seems to be known about who he really was and where he came from. However, he did leave a trail of evidence: letters from colonial governors, the legal depositions of his victims, and even newspaper articles. These can be used to check how accurate Johnson really was.

He began "The Life of Captain Teach" with the following paragraph: "Edward Teach was a Bristol man born, but had sailed some time out of Jamaica in privateers, in the late French war; Yet although he had often distinguished himself for his uncommon boldness and personal courage, he was never raised to any command, till he went a-pirating, which I think was at the latter end of the year 1716, when Captain Benjamin Hornigold put him in a sloop that he had made prize of, and with whom he continued in consortship till a little while before Hornigold surrendered."

When Blackbeard joined forces with his mentor, Benjamin Hornigold, we find surer ground, as the man was well known in pirate circles, and later became a poacher-turned-gamekeeper when he turned his back on his former career and became the chief pirate hunter for a British colonial governor. However, that leaves us with little or nothing to go on if we want to fill in Blackbeard's life before 1716. After that his deeds began to speak for themselves, as archival documents trace the path of his piratical career: the depositions of merchant captains whom he attacked, letters from colonial merchants to their governors, letters from the same governors to their superiors in London, and then the records of the officers and men of Britain's Royal Navy who were charged with hunting down the pirates who infested America's Atlantic seaboard.

Captain Johnson was clear about naming Bristol as Blackbeard's birthplace, and that he pursued a career as a privateer (a shipowner with a letter of marque from his government, which gave him the right to prey on enemy ships) before becoming a pirate. There also remains the possibility that Captain Johnson was wrong and that Blackbeard's early life followed an altogether different course. For instance, in 1900 the distinguished Virginian Thomas T. Upshur claimed that Blackbeard hailed from Accomack County, Virginia, but he never offered anything to help substantiate

this rather wild statement. In the late seventeenth century this peninsula between the Atlantic and the Chesapeake, extending southward from Delaware to Cape Henry, formed part of the Virginia Colony. It is therefore unlikely that, given the publicity surrounding the trial of Blackbeard's surviving crewmen in Williamsburg in 1718, nobody commented on the pirate captain's Virginia roots. It's a pretty safe bet that Upshur got it wrong.

That leaves us with Bristol. From the descriptions of him provided by eyewitnesses, we can assume Blackbeard was a little under forty when he died, which means he would have been born around 1680. At that time the English city was a bustling port, the city's merchants growing rich on the back of transatlantic commerce, most notably the slave trade. Bristol was founded sometime during the Dark Ages, and by the time William the Conqueror reached those parts after 1066, Bristol was already a small but prosperous trading post sited on the north bank of the tidal River Avon. Slaves were big business in those days, too; a highly profitable slave trade existed between Bristol and Viking-held Dublin, a few days' voyage away across the Irish Sea.

The Normans built castles, churches, and bridges in the town, and brought stability to the land around it. Bristol prospered during the Middle Ages thanks to the wool trade, and merchant guilds ensured that the city was able to stand its own against the feudal landowners who ruled its hinterland. By the mid-fifteenth century Bristol was regarded as one of the four biggest towns in England, despite the setbacks caused by the occasional plague or famine, and her merchants began to look further afield for new commercial opportunities. That was when the port really came into its own.

In Spain, conquest might have been the driving force behind voyages of discovery, but in England the impetus was commerce. Although these Bristol explorers made less of an impact than their Spanish or Portuguese counterparts, they did manage to open up whole new markets for their West Country sponsors. In 1480 and 1481 John Jay the Younger ventured into the Atlantic in search of the "Island of Brasil," but both times he was forced to return home to Bristol without sighting any such island.

The Venetian immigrant John Cabot was more successful, and in 1496 he secured the patronage of King Henry VII of England. His charter stated, "We have given and granted to our well-beloved John Cabot, citizen of Venice, to Lewis, Sebastian, and Sanctius, sons of the said John . . . leave

and power to sail to all parts, countries, and seas of the east, of the west, and of the north, under our banners and ensigns . . . to seek out, discover, and find whatsoever isles, countries, regions or provinces of the heathens and infidels whatsoever they be.” King Henry had little to lose and a lot to gain. He finished, “For every their voyage, as often as they shall arrive at our port of Bristol (at which port they shall be bound and holden only to arrive), all manner of necessary costs and charges by them being deducted, to pay unto us in wares or money the fifth part of the capital gain so gotten.” In effect, when John Cabot set sail in the *Matthew* of Bristol in May 1497, he became the first in a long line of Bristol mariners to cross the Atlantic in search of riches, albeit in the name of his king. It was also an early example of the old privateering rules under which the national treasury demanded a 20 percent cut of the profits. The Spanish overseas empire was built on exactly the same divide between private initiative and state profiteering.

John Cabot and his son Sebastian might well have been the first Europeans since the Vikings to set foot in North America—although a case could be made that Hugh Elliot, one of Cabot’s ship captains, had actually visited the place before the explorer did! After all, Cabot thought he was in China, which doesn’t say much for his sense of direction. However, the Cabots opened up a new continent to trade and settlement, paving the way for all the Bristol mariners who followed. During the sixteenth century Bristol sailors concentrated their efforts on Newfoundland, gathering lucrative catches of fish and whales, but made no great effort to settle the coastline beyond the fishing grounds. Others established trading links with Russia, and Bristol continued to develop as a port of international renown. However, not all Bristol seamen were so peaceable. The port also developed a reputation as a haven for pirates.

During the Middle Ages pirates based in Bristol became notorious for attacks on shipping in the Severn Estuary and the Irish Sea. By the sixteenth century Bristol pirates were venturing further afield. The shipowning brothers Andrew and John Barker waged their own private war against the Spanish after one of their ships was seized off the Azores in 1570, preying on Spanish shipping off the Canaries. In 1575 Andrew, too, took two ships as far as Trinidad and the Spanish Main, capturing a Spanish guard ship and looting whatever they could. Barker was killed during a mutiny, and the surviving crew were arrested and imprisoned when they returned home. Bristol captains also played their part in Sir Francis Drake’s raids on

the Spanish Main in the late sixteenth century, and in preventing the Spanish Armada from landing troops on English soil in 1588. This all meant that well before the first English colonists landed in North America, Bristol seafarers were crossing the Atlantic in search of plunder. Blackbeard was simply following a long and dishonorable tradition.

The seventeenth century was a time of colonization as well as discovery, and ships from Bristol participated in the founding of settlements in Newfoundland, New England, and Pennsylvania. Civil war in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland caused a temporary halt to these voyages of settlement, but the conflict also created opportunities for Bristolians of a more aggressive bent.

At the start of the war Bristol was held for Parliament, and with their ships in control of the seas there was little opportunity for privateering. However, in the summer of 1643 Prince Rupert captured the city for the Royalists, thereby gaining a port of strategic importance. Bristol remained in Royalist hands for two years, and Bristol ship captains made the most of their time. Royalist privateers based in Bristol scoured the waters of the Irish Sea and the English Channel for enemy merchantmen while trying to avoid the patrolling warships of the Parliamentary Navy.

Blockade runners carried much-needed men and arms from Ireland to Bristol, while some Bristol privateersmen even joined the Royalist privateering fleet in Ireland, and helped in large-scale attacks on Parliamentary shipping. When the Parliamentarians recaptured Bristol in September 1645, most privateers returned to more legitimate pursuits, or else escaped across the Irish Sea to the privateering den at Kinsale, in southern Ireland. Trade flourished under Cromwell's English Republic, but memories of lucrative piratical or privateering remained, and new enemies, the Dutch, French, and Spanish, all provided fresh opportunities. Blackbeard's father would have been brought up during this period, when adventurous privateersmen could make an easy fortune in plunder.

Privateering was little more than officially sanctioned piracy. In time of war, shipowners or captains could approach their government and obtain a "letter of marque," which entitled them to prey on the enemies of the state on the high seas. In effect, it was a cheap form of economic warfare, setting merchant captains and their ships in search of enemy merchantmen. It didn't cost the government anything, and in fact the government stood to make a profit. Most letters of marque stated that when a prize was



brought into port it was to be sold at auction, and the government that issued the privateering license claimed a significant portion of the profit, usually a quarter of the total value of the captured ship and its cargo. Everyone was a winner, apart from the foreign shipowners and their insurers, of course. Privateering was certainly a lucrative business.

Just how big a business it was can be shown by a few statistics. During the Second Dutch War (1665–67), Dutch privateers captured 360 English merchantmen, and a similar number were taken during the Third Dutch War (1672–74). By contrast, English privateers captured approximately 160 Dutch ships in the first war, and 270 in the second. However, this was privateering on a small scale compared to the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–97), when the French embraced privateering with a vengeance. The French port of Dunkirk became a major privateering port, and French corsairs played merry havoc in the cold, congested waters of the English Channel. They even cruised as far north as Orkney and Shetland, where they preyed on the fishing fleets that were vital to the economy of both Scotland and England. The English replied in kind, but their main effort was concentrated in the Caribbean. There a stream of French merchantmen brought goods and slaves to the wealthy French-held sugar-producing islands such as Martinique and Dominique, and returned laden with sugar and rum. It was a time of rich pickings for the privateers based in Barbados and Jamaica, and by the time the war ended in October 1697 the economy of the islands had been severely damaged, with over 280 French ships captured in the Caribbean alone, roughly one every three weeks.

War broke out again in 1701, when the French king Louis XIV placed his grandson Prince Philip of Anjou on the vacant Spanish throne. This, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13), or Queen Anne's War, soon became a conflict fought on a worldwide scale. The maritime powers of England and Holland were reluctant to see France gain control of the Spanish Empire, so they backed a rival contender, the Archduke Charles of Austria. Philip, now King Philip V of Spain, managed to gain control of most of the Spanish army and navy, and while the English, Austrians, and Dutch fought the French in Spain, the same powers instigated a civil war in Spain itself.

The war dragged on until both sides were exhausted some thirteen years later, but while the armies fought their way around an embattled Europe, the privateers in the Caribbean were enjoying a period of almost



*Henry Every (or Avery), the most successful pirate of them all. In 1694 he captured the flagship of an Indian mogul, then retired with his plunder. His success would have encouraged seamen like Blackbeard to follow in his footsteps.*

unlimited prosperity. With both French and Spanish merchantmen to prey on, the English and Dutch privateers had the entire Caribbean basin to hunt in, and they made the most of their opportunity. This later privateering war was the one Blackbeard participated in, but as a youth he would have been weaned on sailors' stories of the rich pickings to be had on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean during the earlier decade-long round of fighting.

To a child growing up in Bristol during this time it would have seemed that war was normal, and that the opportunities presented by privateering would never come to an end. Blackbeard's enthusiasm would have been fueled by reports of the buccaneers in the Caribbean—men who often pursued their own private war against the Spanish, and who frequently returned to their buccaneering ports laden with plunder from the Spanish Main. It was enough to grip the imagination of any boy brought up in a seafaring town.

A local (and wholly unconfirmed) Bristol legend claims that Blackbeard's father was a privateersman during the Dutch Wars, returning to Bristol before 1680, the time when Blackbeard would have been born.

Another even more persistent version of the tale places his father on a privateer operating out of Port Royal in Jamaica during the War of the Grand Alliance, where he would have been well placed to participate in attacks on both the French and the Spanish. Of course this is mere supposition, and no sailor with the correct surname has so far been found among the scanty records that survive concerning Jamaica-based privateersmen.

That brings us neatly to the next big problem: What was Blackbeard's real name? Most of the historical records describing the career of the pirate provide us with a variety of spellings, all of which were essentially the same name. Captain Johnson calls Blackbeard Captain Edward Teach, and given his accuracy with other, more provable facts, he was probably quite correct. However, other spellings crop up in official documents during his short career, and indeed most use the surname "Thatch." Had Johnson misread his sources? Given the level of information he supplied on the life of Blackbeard and other pirates, it seems likely that he had access to official transcripts of trials, to the affidavits submitted by Blackbeard's victims, and possibly even to the correspondence between colonial or naval officials and their superiors in London.

The name "Teach" was hardly mentioned, except as one of several phonetic variations on "Thatch" such as Thach, Thatche, Tatch, and Tatche. From this it seems far more likely that Blackbeard was called "Thatch" rather than "Teach." Official letters were often dictated to a clerk during this time, and the poor writer did the best he could, often spelling unknown words or names phonetically. With no dictionaries or spell-checkers to hand, it was little wonder that the records were inconsistent.

To complicate matters even further, there is no guarantee that the pirate wasn't operating under a pseudonym. While this might explain the difference between the two main spellings of his name, it is far more likely that if he did use a pseudonym he would have chosen one that sounded completely different from his given surname. One other name crops up. One historian, Robert E. Lee, suggests that Blackbeard might actually be Edward Drummond. Drummond was a Scottish name, derived from the Gaelic words *druim* (back) and *monadh* (mountain). Could the pirate have been Scottish? This seems highly unlikely, as during the early eighteenth century, just a decade after the political union of Scotland and England into Great Britain, the Scots tongue was still markedly different from that used in England.

While old Scots as used by Robert Burns and others was based on English, many words, speech patterns, and intonations were unique to Scotland. It can be argued that as Blackbeard was a sailor, his native tongue would have been diluted by years spent amid predominantly English crews, but he would still have been left with an easily noticeable brogue. No ship captain who encountered him and described the encounter mentioned any such Scots brogue, so we can pretty safely dismiss the possibility that Blackbeard was one of the author's fellow countrymen. While it might be possible that Blackbeard's parents moved to Bristol from Scotland and departed again before their name appeared on any city records, this must be considered pretty unlikely.

We are left with the Thatch or Teach problem. Both are unusual surnames in late-seventeenth-century England, although the variant Thatche is a little more prevalent. The authorities in Bristol conducted a census in 1698, when Blackbeard would still have been a teenager, and it was hoped that this might shed some light on the problem. Unfortunately, the census never mentioned anyone called Teach, or Thatch, or even a variation of the two, although the name Thatcher did appear. Incidentally, no Drummonds were listed, either. That takes us back where we started. Given the prevalence of the name Thatch in contemporary documents relating to the pirate, it would be tempting to opt for this version of his surname.

However, the popularity of Captain Johnson's account means that the surname Teach has been closely associated with the man since May 1724. Therefore, with some reluctance we should side with convention and refer to Blackbeard as Edward Teach, at least until the day some further evidence comes to light. There's always the hope that in some dusty archive or attic some old family papers or official document might shed new light on the matter. Until then, while we should really opt for Teach, to keep things consistent we'll use the cognomen Blackbeard unless we really have to.

Building anything based on the word of Captain Johnson is something like building a home on shifting sands. He might well have been right about the Bristol connection, or the surname Teach (or even Thatch), but given the evidence of the 1698 survey, it is unlikely he was right about both. There is always the possibility that Blackbeard wasn't from Bristol at all, but only sought employment as a mariner there, in which case he could have been born just about anywhere in England. There is also the even more likely possibility that his original family name is some-

where in the census, but we simply don't know what it was. We have already raised the possibility that he used a pseudonym when he took to piracy in an attempt to cover his tracks. If so, he wasn't the first pirate to do so, but it doesn't help us discover who he really was.

There is one possible clue that may help suggest he had some link with Bristol after all. It involves Woodes Rogers (circa 1679–1732), the Bristol-born privateer who became the governor of the Bahamas in 1718. He showed a knack for privateering as a youth, during the last years of the War of the Grand Alliance, and when war broke out again in 1701 he returned to his old trade, this time as a ship's captain, working on behalf of a group of Bristol merchants. The plunder must have been pretty good, as he bought himself a house in Bristol's fashionable Queen's Square.

Even greater triumphs were to follow. In 1708 his backers gave him the command of a small squadron of two custom-built privateers, the *Duke* and the *Duchess*, and he sailed off from Bristol to the South Seas, rounding Cape Horn to enter the Pacific Ocean. The best-known incident from the voyage came in early 1709 when he put into the remote island of Juan Fernandez to pick up water. Instead he discovered the marooned Scottish mariner Alexander Selkirk. This castaway was of course the role model used by Daniel Defoe when he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*. Later that year Rogers cruised off the Peruvian coast and sacked the town of Guayaquil. The squadron returned to Britain in 1711 after completing a circumnavigation of the globe, a feat that won Rogers wide acclaim. This celebrity only increased the following year when he published a swashbuckling account of his voyage.

Woodes Rogers and Blackbeard would have been much the same age, and in a city with a population of just under twenty thousand, there is a possibility that if Blackbeard was indeed raised in Bristol, the two men would probably have known each other, at least by sight. While Rogers was raised in the old heart of the city itself, local legend has it that Blackbeard was brought up in Redcliffe, a less salubrious riverfront suburb on the opposite bank of the river. Whichever part of the city he came from (if indeed he was raised in Bristol at all), from all accounts Blackbeard was a literate, somewhat educated man rather than an illiterate seaman. Presumably he received a modicum of formal schooling. If he went to one of Bristol's half-dozen schools during the last decade of the seventeenth century, the two would surely have met at some stage.

As adventurous boys who could read, it is possible that they had access to the first racy account of privateers, buccaneers, and pirates: A. O. Esquemeling's *Bucaniers of America*, which was first published in Amsterdam in 1679, and translated into English for a bestselling book published in London in 1684. Surely copies would have circulated fairly widely in a port where privateering and maritime adventure were part of the city's heritage. Then Blackbeard would have been in his late teens in 1697 when William Dampier published the first of three *Voyages*, one of the world's first bestselling travel books, an account of his voyages in the Caribbean and the South Seas. Further volumes followed over the next decade, by which time Dampier was as well known as a Bristol-sponsored privateer as he was as an explorer and naturalist. If Blackbeard and Rogers read the works of Esquemeling and Dampier as teenagers, then it was little wonder they took to the high seas in search of adventure when they were older.

Later on both men served as privateersmen, albeit Rogers was by far the more successful of the two. It is therefore quite likely that during their careers their paths crossed, or at least that they heard of each other's exploits. In other words, Rogers would have known Blackbeard by sight, and might have recognized him if the two men met. In 1717 Rogers obtained a commission as the governor of the Bahamas, which was then a den of pirates. As part of his drive to stamp out piracy in the area he offered a pardon to any pirate who was willing to change his ways, a policy adopted by several other colonial governors soon afterward. Blackbeard was well aware of this, as his mentor, Benjamin Hornigold, and many of his fellow shipmates took Rogers up on the offer. Blackbeard decided not to, and went pirating instead. However, after his attack on Charleston he seemed to change his mind, and sought a pardon.

It is interesting that Blackbeard opted to sail to North Carolina rather than the Bahamas to take up the offer. Was he trying to avoid Governor Rogers? If Blackbeard was indeed operating under a pseudonym, the meeting could well have led to Rogers (who would of course know his true identity) recognizing the pirate. While it is unlikely that Blackbeard cared about maintaining the family name, as has been suggested by some, he was probably keen to avoid revealing his true identity. Doing so would reduce his chances of slipping inconspicuously back into Britain and British society, as the pirate Henry Every had done. Most pirates dreamed of retiring to live off their loot, and Blackbeard may well have been planning for such

a future. While there were other reasons why North Carolina proved attractive, New Providence in the Bahamas had been his base, it was where his former shipmates were, and it was a place where an enterprising former pirate could earn the favor of the governor and establish a new career as a pirate hunter. Blackbeard chose to turn his back on all this, and the Woods Rogers connection may well have been the reason why.

Although no official records appear to survive from Blackbeard's youth in Bristol, long-standing local legends provide at least a suggestion of what might have been. That these stories are so detailed bears testimony to the way Bristolians have embraced their notorious townsman as their own, and most probably fleshed out his background to strengthen the connection between pirate and place. It would be nice to discover that they had some grain of truth in them, but unless some new piece of evidence is uncovered, they remain little more than unsubstantiated tales about Bristol's most notorious son. They also help explain how Blackbeard took to the sea in the first place.

It is claimed that Blackbeard was indeed born Edward Teach, and hailed from the seafaring community of Redcliffe. It was said that his father died in 1693, when Blackbeard would have been in his early teens, and that shortly afterward his mother remarried. The story goes that this newcomer took a cordial dislike to his stepson and beat him regularly. After a few years of this, the youth couldn't take any more and turned on his stepfather, beating him half to death. The sixteen-year-old had no alternative but to flee his home, and so he went to the waterfront and signed on as a cabin boy on the next ship to sail from the city. This vessel was a merchantman bound for Port Royal in Jamaica, and so in about 1697 the young Edward Teach arrived in the Caribbean. He proved to be a highly capable seaman, and within two years he had become a fully fledged sailor, serving on Caribbean-based merchant ships. From there he went on to become a privateer.

While this tale would be highly revealing if it were true, there is absolutely no evidence to support the legend. Searches of city records reveal no such attack being reported by anyone called Teach, Thatch, or Drummond, and no charges were brought against anyone of the same name. Indeed between 1690 and 1700 there was no report of any serious domestic violence that might fit the story. Therefore how Blackbeard left Bristol and ended up in the Caribbean will probably remain a mystery,

despite the attractiveness of the local legend. This lack of information on Blackbeard's past is hardly surprising. The lives of most seamen in the eighteenth century went completely unrecorded, and even the most sophisticated governments of the age kept very little in the way of information on their citizens. In those days illiterate sailors signed on to a ship by marking the ship's papers with a cross or mark, or, more often, no written records were kept, and the contract between seaman and captain was sealed not by a piece of paper but by a handshake.

Even though Blackbeard was literate, it is hardly surprising that tracing the career of one young seaman is almost impossible, at least until he crossed the line between law-abiding sailor and maritime outlaw. The pirate historian Robert E. Lee summed this up when he wrote that "Historians . . . can pinpoint documented records of the capture of ships, with details of longitude and latitude, inventories of looted cargo, and minute particulars relating to atrocious conduct; but they can discover little or nothing about the pirates' personal lives before they committed acts of piracy."

What we do know of seamen of the time often comes from court testimony, the statements of men who crossed the legal line from seaman to pirate and were caught. These accounts provide us with a glimpse into the life of the ordinary seaman during the early eighteenth century, and show why so many turned their backs on authority and became pirates. Much if not all of this would have applied to Blackbeard.

In his history of English merchant seamen during this period, Peter Earl posed the question "What sort of life did they lead?" He continued:

One might imagine it was a life of poverty, brutality and great hardship, toiling in leaking sailing ships across the oceans, subject not just to the storms and threat of shipwreck with which the modern sailor is familiar, but also to the threat of capture by the numerous predators who plied the seas and to the arbitrary discipline of captains and boatswains ready with lash and cane to drum their crews into obedience. These men had few mechanical aids, no electronic wizardry to tell them where they were, no wireless to call for aid, no cans to preserve their food. They ate salt food, slept when they could in crowded leaking forecastles, lived in damp, smelly clothes and relied on muscle, common sense and knowledge of the sea to carry their ships across the globe. They were cheated and short-changed by officers



and ship-owners; duped ashore by victuallers and prostitutes; abused and reviled by those who made their living on land.

It was certainly no easy life, and the hardships, injustices, and dangers facing a seaman of this period is a theme we will return to a little later. Still, it was a career that men were increasingly drawn to as the number of merchant ships increased during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and the number of seafaring jobs rose accordingly. Where a century before transatlantic voyages were a rarity, by 1700 merchantmen were plying a regular trade between the Caribbean and the American colonies and Europe. In addition, slavery was becoming big business, and the number of vessels engaged in the “triangular trade” between Europe, West Africa, and the Americas increased dramatically during Blackbeard’s life. There was plenty of work to be had, and it is estimated that by 1700 over thirty thousand English sailors were employed on the high seas, in addition to those from the colonies, from Scotland, and from other European maritime nations, most notably France and Holland.

These opportunities increased even further in 1698 when the Royal Africa Company withdrew its monopoly of trade with African ports, opening up the market to independent slavers who had hitherto only engaged in the slave trade as interlopers. The most profitable trading route of the eighteenth century was the triangular trade route from Britain to West Africa, then on to the Caribbean or the American colonies, then back to Britain. Trade goods were taken from Britain and exchanged for slaves on the African coast.

The slavers would then make the notorious transatlantic Middle Passage to the Caribbean or the Southern colonies, where the slaves would be sold or exchanged for a local cargo, sugar in the Caribbean and tobacco or rice in America. The ship would then make the return leg to Britain. Another version of the triangular trade involved New England merchants who transported flour, meat, and other provisions to the West Indies, where the food would be exchanged for sugar or rum. The New Englanders would transport this to Britain, where it would be exchanged for manufactured goods to be brought back to the colonies.

Not every English or French merchantman engaged in transatlantic commerce was engaged in the slave trade. The lucrative business of supplying the American colonies or the Caribbean islands with European

manufactured goods was also important, although the profits it generated were usually nowhere near as spectacular as those created by the slave trade. By contrast, slave ship owners could recoup the cost of building a vessel in one or two voyages. By 1730, Bristol had surpassed London as the slaving capital of the world. While few slaves ever set foot in either port, the profits from this inhumane traffic poured into the home ports of the slaving ships. Of course, the sailors themselves saw little of this profit, and their lot remained unremittingly harsh, with the added risk of contracting a fatal tropical disease while they laid off the African coast.

As the number of slaves shipped to the plantations of the West Indies and the Southern colonies of British America increased, so, too, did the production of raw materials and manufactured goods to export. Sugar was king in the Caribbean, followed by its refined spirit derivative, rum, and demand for both increased markedly during the period from 1680 to 1720. Meanwhile, the export of rice from the Carolinas, tobacco from Virginia, and lumber and furs from the northern colonies all became increasingly big business.

The cargoes of transatlantic trading vessels reflected this commerce. For example, an outgoing ship of 400 tons, the *Mercy*, sailing from the Virginia Capes to London in 1721, carried “360 tons of tobacco, laden, 24 barrels of herbes of divers sorts, 14 hogges of spirit, 120 bales of flax and 32 barres of pigge [iron].” The diversity of her cargo almost certainly reflects small amounts of private cargo carried by passengers and crew in order to turn a small personal profit from the voyage. Accounts of cargoes looted by pirates in America during the same period also reflect the nature of transatlantic trade at the time, and show what cargo was carried on smaller ships from port to port along the Atlantic seaboard, and from the American colonies to the Caribbean.

The pirate captain John Martel was, “in the month of September 1716, cruising off Jamaica and Cuba, about which time he took the Berkley galley, Captain Saunders, and plundered him of 1,000 pounds in money, and afterwards met with the sloop called the King Solomon, from whom he took some money and provisions, besides goods, to a good value.” In December he encountered the *Greyhound* of London, and “as soon as they could get out of her all her gold dust, elephants teeth and 40 slaves, they sent her upon her voyage.”

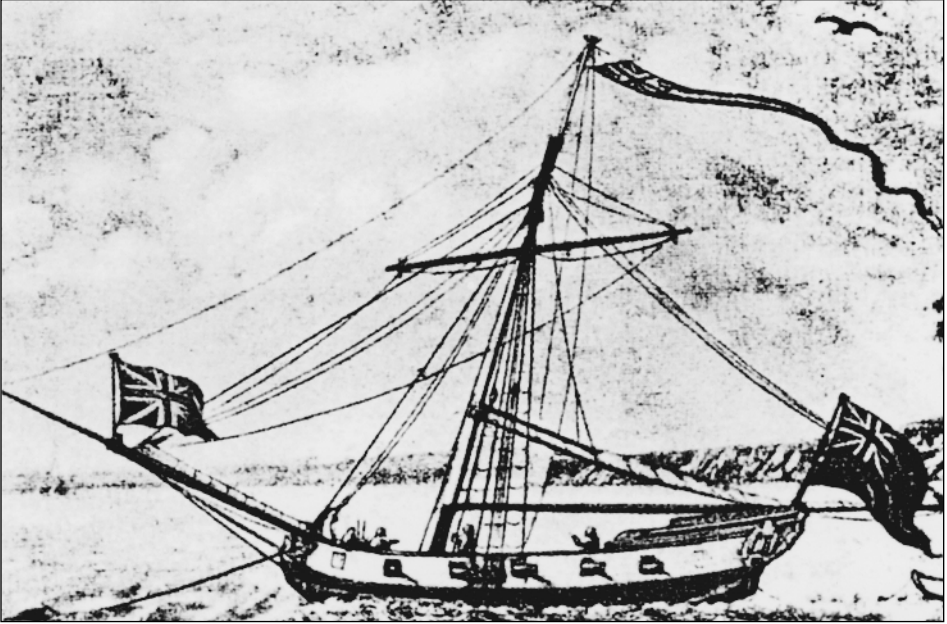
Even the accounts of Blackbeard’s piratical attacks reveal something of

the nature of maritime trade. In 1718 he encountered two French ships off the Carolina coast, “one of them loaded with sugar and cocoa and the other light. Both bound to Martinique.” A few months later he claimed he found another abandoned French ship, so presumably its crew had seen the pirates coming. He took the ship and cargo to Bath Town, North Carolina, where “a court was called and the ship condemned: the governor had 60 hogsheads of sugar for his dividend . . . his secretary and collector for the Province 20, and the rest was shared amongst the other pirates.”

We have no evidence to support how or when the future Blackbeard first reached the Caribbean, but as he sailed from Bristol it can be assumed that the ship he first served on was engaged either in the transport of manufactured goods to a port such as Jamaica, or else the transportation of African slaves. Of the two the latter is by far the most likely. As for when, we can surmise that he made his first Caribbean landfall during the last years of the seventeenth century. While we know nothing of the ship he joined, we do know a little about slave ships of this period.

A prime example is the English slave ship *Henrietta Marie*, which sailed on its first triangular trade voyage in 1697. She was typical of the numerous small merchant ships that transported slaves to the Americas during this period. She was about 60 to 70 feet long, and displaced around 120 tons. She began her working life as a small French merchantman, but she was captured during the closing stages of the War of the Grand Alliance, when English and French privateers scoured the English Channel and its approaches for prizes. She was three-masted, with a rounded bow, a square stern, and a relatively commodious cargo hold. On slave ships this was converted to hold tiers, allowing more slaves to be crammed into the limited space available.

In September 1699 she sailed from London laden with trade goods, bound for West Africa. Captain John Taylor planned to exchange these beads, iron bars, and pewter for slaves when he reached the trading station of New Calabar on the African coast. She arrived there in the middle of December, and remained there throughout the winter. She embarked on the leg of the triangular trade route known as the Middle Passage in the spring of 1700, her 'tween-decks crowded with her human cargo of two hundred African men, women, and children. It was said that you could smell a slaver from a mile downwind, so bad was the stench of unwashed, maltreated humanity on board.



A twelve-gun British sloop in naval service, pictured at anchor off Boston in 1722. Although this vessel was in naval service, she was typical of the well-armed sloops used by Blackbeard and his compatriots during this period.

Accounts of the horrors of the Middle Passage are legion—the terror of the captives, the suicides of those who preferred to jump overboard rather than endure any more, and the lack of air, space, and privacy on the overcrowded slave decks. Given the small size of the *Henrietta Marie*, archaeologists and historians have worked out that the slaves barely had enough room to lie flat, while there was insufficient room to do more than sit upright. Conditions on the *Henrietta Marie* must have been better than most, as only sixteen slaves died during the voyage. On other less fortunate or well-managed ships the death toll could reach as high as 50 percent, although one death in five was considered average.

On the morning of May 18, 1700, the *Henrietta Marie* put in to Port Royal, Jamaica, whereupon her crew washed and cleaned the surviving slaves ready for the auction block. Then came the sale. The slaves were usually auctioned off in groups of up to a half-dozen at a time, with prices ranging from £12 to £18 each, depending on sex, age, and health. Captain Taylor made £827 on the transaction, a profit he immediately reinvested in

local goods that he planned to export back to London. Eighty-one barrels of muscovado sugar, fourteen bales of cotton, eleven barrels of indigo dye, and twenty-one tons of logwood (used for the dying of cloth) were loaded aboard the ship in Port Royal, all goods that would fetch an extremely good price in London. Captain Taylor must have looked forward to the completion of a highly profitable voyage. She set sail from Jamaica bound for England around the middle of August 1700, sailing westward along the southern coast of Jamaica.

The officials who watched her sail were the last people to see any of the crew again. Off Negril Point she set course for the Yucatan Channel. Sailing ships were governed by wind and current, so the best route home for the *Henrietta Marie* was to round the Peninsula de Guanahacabibes, the most westerly tip of Spanish-held Cuba, then head northeast into the Florida Straits. It was there that fate took a turn, and the *Henrietta Marie* was caught up in a hurricane, which came howling up over the mountains of Cuba, lashing Havana and then picking up force as it headed out into the Straits. The slave ship never stood a chance. She was dashed against New Ground Reef, an outlying spur of the Florida Keys, and the ship sank with all hands.

The only reason we know so much about the *Henrietta Marie* today is that in 1972 treasure hunters found her while they were looking for the remains of the fabled Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, which sank in the same area almost eight years before the slaver. When the divers began recovering shackles and English cannon rather than Spanish gold and silver, they left the wreck alone and resumed their search. Mel Fisher and his divers were finally rewarded for their long search in 1985 when they found the remains of the Spanish galleon, complete with her precious cargo. While the treasure hunters may well have been disappointed with their earlier find, archaeologists working for the salvors were not.

No shipwreck of a slave ship of this period had ever been found. It would be another two decades before anything was done with the finds, but in 1995 these artifacts formed the basis for a successful traveling exhibit called "A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the *Henrietta Marie*." During the preparation of the exhibition researchers traced the story of the small slave ship, and curators were able to use the objects themselves to tell the story of the transatlantic slave trade far more eloquently than any book. The exhibition is still touring cities in the United States.

What has all this to do with Blackbeard? Well, quite simply, if he decided to go to sea on a Bristol-based ship during the late 1690s, then the chances are that he would have signed on as a crewman on a slave ship. It would have followed a nearly identical course to the one followed by the *Henrietta Marie* two or three years later, and the young pirate in waiting would have made his first foreign landfall at a port on the West African coast such as New Calabar. As Captain Johnson suggests that Blackbeard subsequently became a privateer based in Jamaica, then it is likely the ship he served on would have completed her transatlantic passage at Port Royal in Jamaica, just like the *Henrietta Marie*. That later ship carried a crew of eighteen men, and her crew size was fairly typical of the bulk of the slaving vessels that operated the triangular trade.

A ship of her size could have been sailed with far less, probably as few as eight to ten competent men, but additional crew were carried to watch the slaves, and to help ensure there was no slave insurrection. We know from shipping returns that crewmen often elected to leave their ship in Port Royal, either because they fell out with their shipmates, because they proved troublesome to the captain, or simply because they saw new opportunities in the Caribbean. A few others had originally signed on as a means of paying their passage to Jamaica, Barbados, or the other slaving ports, and planned to make a new life for themselves when they arrived in the New World.

Although we don't know which of these categories Blackbeard belonged to, later accounts suggest he was a popular captain, a successful seaman, and a man of some considerable charm. It therefore seems likely that if he chose to leave his ship in Port Royal, he did so of his own free will. Then again, by 1697 France and Spain were at peace with England, and so there would be no opportunity to work as a privateer. It is more probable that Blackbeard remained as a sailor on merchant ships during the next few years, learning his trade and gathering the skills he would later put to good use as a pirate. However, if Captain Johnson is right, then Port Royal would soon become Blackbeard's home port.

In the late 1690s Port Royal was a mere shadow of its former self. In its heyday it had been the premier port of the Caribbean, with some 250 ships entering its harbor every year from England, West Africa, and the North American colonies. It was also the buccaneering, freebooting capital of the world, a frontier town on the edge of the mighty Spanish Empire. Like a

bank that never closed, the treasure ports of the Spanish Main were visited by these buccaneers with almost monotonous regularity during the later seventeenth century, and much of the plunder was brought back to Port Royal, where it was usually squandered on drink and whores. It is little wonder that Port Royal earned itself the title of “the Sodom of the New World.”

A settlement was established there soon after Cromwell’s Jamaican expedition captured the island from the Spanish in 1655. The English found that the south side of the island site contained an easily defended natural harbor, and so on a spit that contained nothing but sand and land crabs they rebuilt the Spanish earthwork fortification there, then created a small port. With little help from England, Jamaica’s governors were forced to look to the buccaneers for help in protecting their newly won island. The term “buccaneer” comes from the Arawak word “*buccan*,” a fire used to smoke meat. In the 1620s and 1630s the name was appropriately used to describe the European outlaws who roamed the Spanish-owned island of Hispaniola, hunting wild cattle and selling their produce to passing ships. These rough, lawless men clashed with the Spanish, but were relatively safe from Spanish patrols in the mountainous hinterland and jungle-fringed coast of the island.

A buccaneer haven was established on the nearby island of Tortuga, and by the 1640s the majority of these men had turned their backs on their cattle and had taken to piracy. While this was good for Spanish landowners in Hispaniola, it was disastrous news for the Spanish government. They began with small-scale attacks on ships passing through the Windward Passage, but by the time the English had secured Jamaica they were ready to move on to greater things. By offering the buccaneers a refuge from the Spanish, the English authorities of Jamaica began an association between Port Royal and the buccaneers that would last until the end of the century.

Known as “the Brethren of the Coast,” these buccaneers were mostly English and French, although their ranks included outlaws of all nations, creeds, and colors. By the late 1650s they had begun to attack Spanish coastal settlements, and under the leadership of buccaneering captains such as Christopher Myngs and Jean l’Olonnais they waged their own private war against the Spaniards. This was a war fought regardless of minor diplomatic inconveniences such as England, France, and Spain being at peace with one another. The old Elizabethan seadog’s expression of “no

peace beyond the line” applied to these buccaneers as much as it did to men like Sir Francis Drake.

The most successful of all these buccaneers was Sir Henry Morgan, a Welsh-born seaman who terrorized the Spanish Main for the best part of a decade. With the connivance of the Jamaican governor he used Port Royal as his base for devastating raids on Puerto Principe and Porto Bello in 1668, then Maracaibo and Gibraltar the following year. His most spectacular achievement was his capture and sack of Panama on the Pacific coast in 1671, a feat achieved by capturing the Spanish fort at the mouth of the Chagres River, then leading his buccaneers across the steaming jungle-clad Isthmus of Panama to fall on the city. This jewel in the Spanish colonial crown was captured after a brief but bloody battle. Although recalled to England to answer for his actions, he returned to Jamaica, where he was able to retire to the estates he bought with his plunder. He got out of the business just in time, as new laws came into force in 1681 outlawing unsanctioned attacks on the Spanish.

Henceforth anyone conducting buccaneering raids on their own initiative were labeled as pirates—which of course they were in the first place. By the time of his death in 1682 the heyday of the Jamaican buccaneer was all but over, and the port resorted to more legitimate forms of income. As Europeans developed a sweet tooth and demand for sugar soared, Port Royal developed into a major trading port, where slaves, sugar, and rum became the cornerstones of the island economy. Its population grew to over sixty-five hundred people, making it one of the busiest ports in the Americas, and as big as Boston.

Even without hordes of buccaneers spending their loot on rum, women, and cards, Port Royal was a notoriously rough place. One somewhat biased visitor claimed that “its population consists of pirates, cut-throats, whores, and some of the vilest persons in the whole of the world.” It was said that the port boasted more bars and brothels than any other port in the Americas, and the critics may well have been right. Then, shortly before noon on June 7, 1692, the whole lawless freebooting boomtown phase of Port Royal’s existence came to an abrupt end.

The first tremors of a massive earthquake rocked the town, and scores of buildings collapsed. Other even more severe shocks followed, and a tsunami-like tidal wave thrown up by the earthquake swept over the port like an avenging angel. Within minutes it was all over, but in those few



seconds almost every building in the port had been destroyed, and the two-thirds of it facing north toward the anchorage had been inundated by the sea. It has been estimated that some two thousand people died in the disaster, followed by roughly the same number over the next few months as disease took its toll on the survivors. Port Royal never recovered. One wag claimed that the earthquake was the wrath of God, meted out on “that wicked and rebellious place.”

The young Blackbeard must have arrived there only a few years after the disaster, and would have heard tales of the port in its buccaneering heyday. By that stage new buildings were springing up in Kingston, across the bay to the north, but the remains of Port Royal still served as the island’s main port until well into the eighteenth century. He and his shipmates probably first arrived as slavers, and would have been immersed in the mechanics of the sale of their human cargo. To them Port Royal would still have appeared a fascinating place, with its lush tropical backdrop, its clear blue waters, and its bustling humanity. While the days of the buccaneers were over, the port did enjoy something of a revival during times of war. If Bristol legend is to be believed, Blackbeard’s father was based here while he served as a privateersman during the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–97). If we are to accept Captain Johnson, his son performed the same role there during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13).

During that long war a growing number of privateersmen gathered in Port Royal, preying on French and Spanish ships from Newfoundland to the coast of Brazil. French and Spanish privateersmen did exactly the same, although the bulk of the French privateering fleet was based in St.-Malo and Dunkirk, on the French coast. They still managed to sail as far as the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, and over a thousand British or Dutch merchantmen were captured during the war. The political union of England and Scotland in 1707 opened up Jamaica to Scottish seamen, and the few records that survive show that a sizable number of these men took advantage of this opportunity.

Eager to gain the edge in commercial mayhem, in 1708 the British government decreed that they would no longer demand a 20 percent share of the profits from the sale of captured vessels and cargo. A new wave of privateering ships put to sea, and soon it was the French who were on the defensive in both European and American waters. As an example, no less than 125 privateering expeditions sailed from Bristol alone during the

latter years of the war, and the story was repeated in most other British ports that boasted a merchant fleet that could be converted into privately owned warships. Port Royal was even busier, with thirty-nine privateering vessels based there in 1711 alone, crewed by up to four thousand plunder-hungry privateersmen.

A typical purpose-built privateer of the time was the *Cinque Ports*, a newly built vessel that accompanied William Dampier's *St. George* on a privateering expedition that left British waters in September 1703. She was described as a galley, but she was quite unlike the oared warships of antiquity. The 90-ton vessel had a full set of masts and sails, just like a regular square-ended three-masted sailing ship. However, a series of oar ports lined her side, and sweeps or oars were provided so she could be rowed into action against target ships when there was no wind.

Among her sixty-eight-man crew was Alexander Selkirk, the man who became the model for Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe when Captain Stradling of the *Cinque Ports* marooned Selkirk on the Pacific island of Juan Fernandez, some five hundred miles off the coast of Chile. She carried sixteen guns, and so was more than a match for any Spanish merchantman she encountered during her voyage. She was also provisioned with enough supplies to last six months, allowing her to reach the unprotected Spanish shipping lanes in the Great South Sea (the contemporary name for the Pacific Ocean). However, most of the privateers operating out of Jamaica seem to have been smaller vessels than the *Cinque Ports*, mostly sloops or brigs with an armament of twelve to sixteen guns, and a crew of about forty to sixty men.

The war ended with both sides exhausted and nearly bankrupt. A temporary secession of hostilities was announced, and then in April 1713 the embattled French signed the Treaty of Utrecht with Great Britain and Holland. In the treaty the French ceded their possessions in Newfoundland and parts of what is now Canada to the British, and in return Queen Anne's government recognized Philip V as king of Spain, but any political union between France and Spain was officially dissolved. The following year the Austrian Empire signed its own peace agreement, and in 1715 the Treaty of Madrid brought an end to the war between the last contenders, Spain and British-backed Portugal.

While the end of the war might have been good news for the majority of Europe's population, it was decidedly a disaster for the seamen who had

made a good living out of wartime plunder. It has been estimated that the end of the war, and consequently the canceling of all privateering contracts, put upwards of forty thousand British and Dutch seamen out of a job. Many of these would have been cast ashore in home ports such as Amsterdam, Bristol, London, Plymouth, or Leith, but several thousand of them found themselves stranded in the Caribbean and the North American seaboard.

The figure of six thousand British seamen in this predicament has been suggested, and the streets of Port Royal, Boston, New York, Charleston, and Bridgetown would have been littered with discharged privateersmen, all looking for work. While peace brought an increase in trade and an expansion in the number of merchant ships, this didn't help many of these former privateersmen. For a start, their ships were purpose-built for their role—lean, fast, heavily armed, and well manned. They lacked the cargo capacity of regular tubby merchant ships, and were expensive to operate. While many privateersmen turned their back on a period of plenty and signed on as seamen on board merchant ships, others looked for more lucrative and less legal means of employment.

Captain Johnson claims that Blackbeard “sailed some time out of Jamaica in privateers, in the late French war; yet though he had often distinguished himself for his uncommon boldness and personal courage he was never raised to any command, till he went a-pirating.” Although we have no firm idea when Blackbeard began his privateering career, Johnson does suggest he was good at his job. If we assume that he began his sea-going career as a merchant seaman, it is likely that he became a privateer several years before the end of the war. A possible date is around 1708, when the British government's decision to waive its right to 20 percent of profits led to an upsurge in privateering numbers. If he first went to sea during the late 1690s, then he would have been a highly experienced seaman in his late twenties by that stage, and a prime candidate for recruitment into a privateering crew.

Although the war ended when the Treaty of Utrecht was signed in April 1713, the Spanish were still at war with Britain's Portuguese allies, so even after word that peace had been declared reached Jamaica in the summer of 1713, privateersmen might have been able to take advantage of this for a few more months, until clarification of the political situation reached the Jamaican governor in September. During this last summer of legitimate

plundering hundreds of British and Dutch privateers would have been at sea, and would only have learned of the unfortunate advent of peace when they returned to port with their now-worthless prizes. However, by the late summer of 1713 almost every privateer in the Caribbean would have realized that the party was over.

By that time Blackbeard would have been looking around for fresh opportunities, legitimate or otherwise. There was little gainful employment to be had. One possible avenue of hard but honest work was already being closed to men like Blackbeard. For over half a century communities of logwood cutters had been scattered along the Caribbean shoreline of Central America. The majority worked on the shores of the Bay of Campeche, so they were also sometimes called “bay men.” These primitive settlements were places that many privateersmen knew as friendly havens on a hostile coast. In fact, many of these settlers were former buccaneers and privateersmen, and the hardships endured by most logwood cutters meant that many were willing recruits when a privateer anchored offshore and asked for volunteers.

Logwood was the boom crop of its day, producing a vivid red dye that transformed the clothing industry in Europe. It was the Spanish who first discovered the strange leguminous tree growing along the coastal fringe of the Yucatan Peninsula. It had a deep red heartwood that was similar to the brazilwood found in South America, and the value of this red timber as a dye soon became apparent. The logwood tree (*haematoxylum campechianum*) was duly harvested for this heartwood, and the Spanish maintained a monopoly on its harvesting until English interlopers arrived in the area. The buccaneers discovered that the first captured Spanish cargoes of logwood sold in Europe for over £100 a ton, making it a highly valuable commodity.

This was almost all profit, as in 1676 William Dampier claims that the logwooders sold their cut heartwood for £5 a ton. By the time Blackbeard was looking for work, a single merchant ship leaving Jamaica with 50 tons of logwood in her hold could sell her cargo in London for upwards of £2,500. Although the price had now stabilized at around £50 a ton, the timber was one of the most valuable exports the Caribbean could produce, although the problems of gathering the heartwood meant that quantities available for sale were substantially lower than those of rum, sugar, rice, or tobacco. Between 1713 and 1716, some 4,965 tons of logwood were



Technically the Spanish Main consisted of the Caribbean seaboard of South America, but in Blackbeard's day the name encompassed all Spanish dominions in the Caribbean. This map of 1720 shows the routes taken by the Spanish treasure flotas, while arrows show the direction of the prevailing wind.

shipped from the Caribbean to Britain, an export valued at more than £60,000 per annum. At the same time the colonies of Virginia and Maryland were exporting five times that value of tobacco leaves every year. Still, logwood remained a small-scale but highly profitable business.

While there was money to be made, conditions in these logwood camps were extremely primitive, and the camps perched on the edges of mangrove-fringed bays plagued by mosquitoes, alligators, and snakes. William Dampier provided a valuable firsthand account of this life in his book *Voyages and Descriptions*. In fact, he argued that these men were less of a threat to the Spanish as logwood cutters than they were as pirates or privateers. When a ship arrived, the logwooders would celebrate with bacchanalian excess, and often exchanged logwood for rum, regardless of the commercial value of the timber. Dampier also claimed that many logwooders used their spare time to raid neighboring Native American villages, or even passing Spanish merchant ships.

In a way the logwooders of Blackbeard's time resembled the early buccaneers who made a living on the coast of Hispaniola during the early seventeenth century. By 1713 the number of logwood cutters had dropped to less than a thousand, as the Spanish stepped up their systematic harassment of the logwooding communities. Spanish ships would arrive in the bay, and although the loggers would hide in the jungle, sailors and marines would burn their settlement and seize any tools, weapons, and timber they found. The end of the war meant that the Spanish could devote fresh resources to driving off these interlopers, and by 1715 most British logwooders had packed up and left.

Historian David Cordingly claims that "Driven out of the Bay of Campeche, many of the logwood cutters headed for the Bahamas. The harbor of Nassau on the island of New Providence became the headquarters for another community of pirates, and acted as a meeting point for pirate ships operating throughout the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean." This is where Blackbeard ended up, and it is in Nassau (or New Providence) that we can replace the supposition that surrounds his early life with a substantial body of verifiable facts. It was in the Bahamas that he would meet his mentor, Benjamin Hornigold, and where he turned his back on the law.

Given the lack of hard evidence, the suggested course of Blackbeard's early life outlined above remains little more than educated guesswork, a

foundation laid on shaky ground. However, as soon as a pirate began attacking merchant ships and their captains and crews lived to tell the tale, people started writing about his exploits. Until he arrived in New Providence he was little more than one of the thousands of shadowy, nameless figures who contributed to world events without leaving a mark. From that point on, he would become an infamous and much-reported figure in his own right, leaving a growing trail of evidence behind him to mark his passage through history. As Captain Johnson put it, Blackbeard was about to burst on the scene “like a frightful meteor,” and his coming “frightened America more than any comet.”

