PIRACY
IN EARLY BRITISH AMERICA

(Above) The 'Jack Rackham' - one of the variants used by a pirate leader on the standard 'skull and crossbones' flag designs.
(Right) The stuff of legend: Edward Teach, alias 'Blackbeard', in a contemporary engraving, highlighting the smoking fuses he wore in his hair to complete the image of terrifying his victims along the North American coast.

Simon Smith sifts fact from myth to reveal that seemingly anarchic buccaneers often operated as highly organised and efficient businessmen in the waters of the Caribbean.

Pirates are one of history's most colourful gifts to literature: around a few certain facts, myths and legends have been woven by story-tellers. The lives of the most notorious pirates of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century attracted attention from contemporary writers, such as Daniel Defoe, and in the next century inspired artists as diverse in range as the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, the poet Lord Byron, and the composer Hector Berlioz. Pirate tales encompass the timeless and highly marketable themes of escapist adventure and rebellion against authority, motifs equally adaptable to both blood-thirsty and comic interpretations.

Tracing the different representations of pirates it is fascinating to see how the pirate persona has changed over time. The images pirates chose for themselves, epitomised by the symbol of the Jolly Roger, emphasised violence and menace so as to strike fear into the hearts of victims. These psychopathic leanings are a world apart from the romantic image generated by writers such as J.M. Barrie, reinforced later by Hollywood, of pirates as either gangs of ruffians led by civilised gentlemen with a sense of honour or bands of rough diamonds led by cads.

The public's appetite for new material on piracy has been fed by historians as well as fiction writers and film makers. Most historical contributions
are lively accounts whose primary aim is to entertain, yet the best work has been written by scholars who have not simply viewed the subject of piracy as an excuse to let one's hair down and have retained a sense of responsibility about representing a past that has been often grotesquely distorted.

In 1700 the Council of Trade and Plantations received word from a Virginia correspondent that, 'All the news of America is, the swarming of pirates not only on these coasts, but all the West Indies over'. Piracy was an ever present problem in British America over the century roughly spanning 1620 to 1720 and reached its zenith during the early years of the eighteenth century when the pirates enjoyed a 'golden age' of plunder in the Caribbean. Even at the height of the pirate menace, however, it must not be forgotten that law-abiding individuals, privately conducting their everyday affairs, formed a quiet, almost silent majority. It is tempting for historians to place false emphasis on the exceptional and newsworthy. Surviving records encourage such an approach because historical documents are more likely to chronicle the fate of thieves, debtors or bankrupts than to detail the routine, legitimate activities of men and women peacefully going about their lawful business.

The best studies of early modern piracy have sought to overcome such bias by placing the phenomenon within its wider social context. One method of achieving this aim has been to view piracy as a form of protest undertaken by persons discontented by their position within society seeking a way of escape from unsatisfactory conditions. An outstanding example of this approach is Marcus Rediker's, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. In his book Rediker presents pirate bands as alternative societies of masterless men fighting back against brutal working conditions and unjust social authority. The present article offers a different perspective of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century piracy, yet one which shares the objective of replacing myth and romance with a more realistic picture of pirate life by integrating the illicit with the legitimate economy. Instead of viewing pirates as irresponsible, lawless anarchists, it portrays piracy as an organised and intelligible response to social and economic conditions.

Piracy was a marginal activity, mostly chosen by participants who were confronted by even worse alternatives. Seafarers have traditionally earned poor wages and laboured under atrocious conditions. It was for good reason that Samuel Johnson once wryly likened living on board a ship to serving a prison sentence, only with the chance of being drowned. In both Europe and the Americas the populations of seaports usually included a pool of poor labourers unable to find regular work in agriculture or industry, many of whom were mopped up by the fishing industry and the merchant marine. The notorious early Caribbean pirates, the buccaneers, were originally a group of poor settlers evicted by the Spanish authorities and who later recruited heavily from disillusioned white settlers and from the crews of merchant seamen seeking release from poorly paid and overcrowded occupations. Emigrant servants to the Americas experienced a sharp diminution in their prospects during the sugar revolution of the 1640s and 1650s, which transformed agriculture in the West Indies. The displacement of smallholders by large-scale plantations and the increased use of black slaves undermined the status of servants finishing their indentures and contributed to social unrest. While most settlers were able to migrate to other colonies where opportunities were better, some were forced into menial work on plantations or else left the land and congregated in the seaports looking for work.

Although poor prospects contributed generally to the allure of piracy, it is unlikely that hardship alone would have encouraged many
of these individuals to venture into so risky a trade had it not been for a crucial additional factor. During periods of warfare English, French, Dutch and Portuguese government officials encouraged private ship owners to attack each other's vessels and particularly those of Spain, their common enemy. Privateering was the raiding of enemy commercial shipping by armed vessels authorised by a 'letter of marque', or 'reprisal'. These documents legalised piracy in the sense that they enabled the holder to bring prize cargoes for sale into port without fear of reprisal by the authorities for provoking the anger of foreign nations. Letters of marque provided crews of seamen with a wartime source of employment and experience in the use of weapons, but at the end of the conflicts, in the absence of any social programme to ease the transition to peacetime employment, former privateers found it tempting to continue their operations as pirates. European governments, by privatising part of their armed forces, created floating schools of crime and stored up trouble for the peace that followed.

Pirate communities also existed because they proved themselves viable societies capable of collective action. It is easy to be misled by anecdotes of drunkenness and violent behaviour reported in the sensational contemporary accounts of the lives of pirates, or expressed in the sermons preached by Puritan divines before the execution of pirates in North America. Individual pirates had deservedly bad reputations, but just as Edward Heath, the former prime minister, once described Tiny Rowlands as the 'unacceptable face of capitalism', psychopaths like Blackbeard may be regarded as the unacceptable aspect of anarcho-capitalism.

Piracy refutes the common aphorism that, 'there is no honour among thieves'. While engaged in pirate activity crews swore to abide by a set of basic rules that specified obligations and penalties. These voluntary agreements reflected community conceptions of rights and justice worked out and renegotiated between captain, quartermaster, ship's council and crew. There was a pressing reason for such explicit codes of conduct. On pirate vessels there was no armoury and each crew member was responsible on pain of punishment to keep his firearms, knives and cutlass clean and in good working order. The fact that individual pirates carried weapons imparted a necessary element of consensus into decision making: the first rule on board Bartholomew Roberts' vessel, for example, specified that every man was to have a vote 'in affairs of moment'. Pirate ships can thus be viewed as a form of participatory democracy. In similar fashion extreme libertarian organisations in the United States today defend the right to bear arms under the Constitution on the grounds that an armed citizenry obliges the government to seek a high level of popular agreement when framing legislation.

Many aspects of the codes devised by pirate bands reflected the need to respond to the free availability of lethal weapons. An arbitration system was devised with a monopoly in the use of legitimate force in order to settle disputes arising between crew members and to punish infringements of the code. The ship's quartermaster was the principal adjudicator of quarrels and charged with settling outstanding disagreements on shore between disputants, 'at sword or pistol', in contests often resolved by the drawing of first blood rather than a fight to the death. Serious offences were punishable by marooning on desolate islands, Moses' Law (thirty-nine lashes) or summary execution by a pistol shot to the head. The most famous pirate punishment, walking the plank, was never used. Crew members realised that the long term pay-off to devising and conforming to an agreed set of rules was much better than anarchy and a shoot-out.

Pirates contemplating robbery at sea first organised themselves into a council: the highest authority on board ship. In council the crew drew up articles, chose a captain, agreed on a plan of campaign and also decided all matters materially affecting the welfare of the vessel. The two most widely read early eighteenth-century accounts of piracy, by Exquemelin and Captain Charles Johnson, paint a picture of piracy as an essentially futile activity characterised by short careers and the salt-

(Right) The sack of Puerto Principe in Cuba by Henry Morgan and his men, 1668. His commission from the governor of Jamaica to carry out such raids blurred the line between pirate and entrepreneur.
ing away of booty in taverns and 'stews'. Although the message contained within these two authorities is that crime did not pay, the surviving pirate articles they both cite nevertheless indicate a strong sense of purpose in pirate circles. Articles drawn up over bowls of rum punch specified a target level of wealth accumulation for individual pirates and also made provision for crew members injured in fighting while taking prizes. In theory, the terms on offer were generous: a target income of £1,000 a man and compensation rates ranging from 400 pieces of eight for the loss of a hand to 800 pieces of eight for an arm.

Pirate companies also spurned the security of wage labour in favour of profit sharing, operating on the principle of 'no prey, no pay'. At the end of a period of raiding the spoils were divided amongst the band according to a formula agreed in advance when the articles had been sworn to. In comparison with the merchant marine or the royal navy during this period, the distribution of rewards was egalitarian. The usual procedure was to grant ordinary crew members one share in the loot, the captain up to five or six shares, senior pirates such as the ship's quartermaster two shares, and junior crew members half a share. Although the profitability of what contemporaries euphemistically termed 'going on the grand account' can never be known, earnings from pirate raids boosted the prosperity of Port Royal in Jamaica and proved an important source of capital formation in the early development of this colony.

Pirate companies also proved themselves capable of mutual cohabitation and co-operation in the pursuit of common goals. During the period 1630-70 the main thrust of pirate activity broadened from intercepting the increasingly well protected Spanish treasure fleets to encompass the raiding of poorly defended towns and settlements in Spanish America. Often pirate companies were seen by colonial governors as a method of carrying out military activity against a potential enemy in what was officially peacetime. 'Admiral' Henry Morgan, for example, was commissioned by the governor of Jamaica to mount some well-documented attacks on Panama, Carthagena and Porto Bello in the years following the formal sign-
ing of the Peace of Breda in 1667. Pirates required a base from which to launch operations of this magnitude and early pirate ‘colonies’ developed on the islands of Guadeloupe, West Hispaniola and at Port Royal, Jamaica.

After 1670 pirate activity switched in emphasis away from raiding towards robbery at sea, but although the act of holding up vessels was normally carried out by individual companies there remained a need for the provision of essential collective goods, such as mutual defence. Secure retreats were needed to provision ships, recuperate strength and to carry out maintenance. In order to preserve a vessel’s speed, for example, it was necessary to drag the ship on shore and remove barnacles crusted on to the hull in a process known as ‘carring’.

Pirate bases were located at Tortuga (Haiti) and Nassau (Bahamas) where pirates instituted additional codes to control relations between the several companies. These agreements were similar to those developed by pirates operating from Madagascar, on the North African coast, which renamed itself ‘Libertalia’ during the period of piratical control. Access to safe bases was essential for successful piracy and may have enabled established pirate leaders to form an effective cartel, preventing the ‘over-fishing’ of prizes by too many organised bands in one area.

Madagascar, for example, seems never to have been populated by more than seventeen pirate vessels at any one time while the maximum number of companies operating out of Nassau was around thirty. In the early eighteenth century pirates congregated at New Providence in the Bahamas and along the North Carolina coast in the vicinity of the Cape Fear river. According to James Logan of Pennsylvania, there were 1,500 pirates active along the American coast in 1717, of which 800 were based at New Providence.

The existence of piracy also owed much to organisational weaknesses in the legitimate trading community. Although dependent on one another, human beings also have a behavioural tendency to cheat the system when possible. Traders offering the opportunity of exchanging booty for food, clothing, guns, wine, women and song formed commercial contacts as vital to the buccaneers as shopkeepers prepared to handle stolen merchandise are to present-day thieves. In the absence of ready access to legitimate society, pirates would have had to behave as Robert Louis Steven-

son’s fictional pirates behaved: by burying their treasure on remote islands recorded on maps marked with a cross. The British authorities emphasised the prevalence of these practices by introducing in 1699 and 1722 acts that deemed traders aiding and abetting sea robbers as accomplices to piracy itself, liable to the same penalties as its perpetrators.

Ironically, however, the British authorities at the same time encouraged colonial merchants and traders to do business with pirates by restricting legal trade between British plantations and foreign colonies according to a body of commercial law termed the Navigation Acts. Both the French and Spanish colonial powers also passed similar restrictive acts that hindered legitimate exchange between colonists of different nationalities. The lack of a legal market provided pirates with the opportunity to create a black market by seizing foreign cargoes of sugar, coffee and chocolate and transporting them for disposal in British colonies. Pirates successful in robbing treasure ships were also likely to be welcomed by traders hoping to sell goods and services for cash payment. For much of the eighteenth century Britain’s colonies suffered from shortages of currency, in part because the authorities resisted the printing of paper money, rendering potential cash injections welcome to a colony’s tradesmen.

The Carolinas form a good example of colonial settlements with conditions favourable to the growth of piratical activity. In the first place the region was remote, lying some 600 miles away from the nearest
source of potential support in Virginia. Charleston, the port capital of South Carolina, lived in fear of possible attack from Spanish neighbours, fearing the presence of English settlers close to their territory. Secondly, prior to the development of rice cultivation in the early eighteenth century, the Carolinians lacked a major export staple capable of bringing prosperity to the colony. Under these circumstances the pirate companies operating out of Cape Fear were valued by colonists for their defensive value and for the trade they brought to the region. Thirdly, it must be emphasised that the resources available to the Carolina authorities to suppress piracy, even had governors desired it, were limited. The upswing in pirate numbers following the decommissioning of privateers in 1713 was less welcome to the maturing colony than before, but deteriorating relations between colonists and native American Indians in the Carolinas diverted resources away from policing the coast towards internal security. Pirate companies based around Cape Fear, of which that of Edward Teach or 'Blackbeard' was the most infamous, formed a menace to shipping along the North American coast and were eventually suppressed only with the assistance of Virginia, whose tobacco traders had suffered from pirate depredations.

Piracy in the sense of a failure to define and enforce property rights also existed in the eighteenth century and helps explain the prevalence of sea robbers in the Americas. Successful rovers required detailed knowledge of the topography of intricate American coastlines and of the prevailing wind systems on and off the major trading routes. Most pirates operated close to shore and, therefore, needed to know the location of hazards and the best places for safe careening, for laying an ambush, or for taking refuge from pursuers. Skilled navigators and explorers such as William Dampier, Basil Ringrose, Lionel Wafer and William Hack all at one time cast in their lot with pirate companies. These individuals possessed knowledge and skills in scarce supply and chose to capitalise on their talents by sailing with the pirates in return for a share in the haul. The alternative method of making a return on their expertise open to the explorers was to publish maps and guides for sale, but once in the public domain discovery rents were likely to be speedily dissipated by informal exchanges of information or the 'pirating' of maps by unscrupulous publishers.

There was one other factor of great importance in explaining why piracy flourished in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Caribbean. In 1726 the author of A Discourse of the Lawes Relating to Pirates and Piracies posed the following interesting conundrum: 'Supposing that in Time of Peace, a thousand Pirates in different Parties were preying upon the Trade of the Nation, is it not richly worth the Cost, for the Public to give $20,000 for the taking and destroying them?' Up until the 1720s this question had been answered in the negative: neither the trading community nor the state had been prepared to allocate sufficient resources for the effective suppression of piracy. The threat of sea robbery imposes extra costs on traders: insurance premiums rise, extra sailors and guns must be placed on board ship for protection. As a result of increased transaction costs, less goods will be traded at higher prices. Combating the pirate menace, however, also involves costs as naval forces must be commissioned and the pirates hunted to ground. Prior to the 1720s, the potential benefits of riding the seas of pirates were judged too small in relation to the likely costs. It must be remembered that the Americas were the scene of European imperial rivalry during this period with no possibility of a coordinated effort on the part of Britain, France, Spain and Holland against piracy. Unilateral action eventually drove pirates from the seas: one country, Britain, assumed all the burden of costs, but benefited only in proportion to its share of enlarged European trade with America.

Hitherto, instead of fighting piracy directly, a range of public and private measures were deployed. The state adopted two principal strategies for dealing with piracy: naval escorts and protection money. Under the convoy system armed naval vessels escorted merchant shipping in areas of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean at risk from piracy. The cost of the escort was met by the merchant community in the form of a convoy duty equivalent to about four times the peace-time insurance rate along safe routes. One difficulty with this policy was that it discouraged the navy from making a concerted effort to hunt down pirate ships since naval vessels found escort duty profitable, particularly in view of the opportunities it offered to officers to engage in private trade. The other strategy adopted by the state in the Mediterranean, although not the Americas, was to try and pay off the pirates. Algerian pirates were offered a bribe
in return for a promise to let British ships carrying special documents, called Mediterranean passes, proceed unmolested.

The private sector also preferred to deploy measures designed to reduce the uncertainties posed by the pirate menace rather than subscribe funds or pay extra taxes in order to pay for direct action against piracy. A well-developed insurance system enabled legal traders to spread the risk of losing a vessel widely, thus reducing the likelihood of personal bankruptcy. Merchants avoided owning vessels outright over this period, preferring instead to take shares in vessels and to split their cargoes between several ships rather than putting all their eggs in one basket. It was also open to merchants to increase manning levels on ships carrying particularly valuable cargoes, or else to provide the ship’s master with special instructions in the event of meeting with a pirate foe. On occasion, pirate bands relied on surprise when attacking their prey and were utterly uncompromising in their objectives. Such behaviour, however, was more typical of the assaults on Spanish treasure ships and South American settlements during the 1680s than of attacks on merchant seamen in the British West Indies during the early eighteenth century. It was more usual for pirates, on encountering merchant vessels, to run up a hostile red or black flag and to invite the ship to surrender. Negotiation at sea was possible and in this manner some masters managed to keep their ship, their owner’s cargo and even an allowance for freight on the cargo of other merchants that had been surrendered.

Such accommodations infuriated the British authorities and in 1682 a law was passed obliging the master of a ship of 200 tons and sixteen guns to fight boarders. Once on board, moreover, pirate bands often approached common sailors and inquired as to their treatment under the captain of their ship. On these occasions, captains or masters found to have acted brutally towards their crew were punished by what the pirates described as the ‘administration of justice’ and afterwards the seamen were invited to join the pirate community. The spread of this method of recruitment provoked the authorities to pass an act in 1678 specifying harsher penalties for desertion at sea.

The period 1660 to 1750 formed the ‘golden age’ of piracy in the Caribbean. It is thought that some 5,000 pirates were active over these years, although probably no more than between 1,000 and 2,000 at any one time. Included in this roll call were Henry ‘Long Ben’ Avery, the female duo of Anne Bonny and Mary Read who sailed with John ‘Calico Jack’ Rackham, Edward Teach – the notorious ‘Blackbeard’, Henry Morgan, William Kidd, Bartholomew Sharp, Bartholomew Roberts and others of renown. The second decade of the eighteenth century, however, formed the high watermark of West Indian piracy and henceforth, although never extinguished entirely from colonial waters, piracy was in general retreat from this area.

Democracy rules: John Rackham, chosen by the pirate crew of Charles Vane to replace him as captain. The unfortunate Vane was cast adrift in a small sloop.
Effective action against piracy was handicapped at the start of the eighteenth century by the fact that the definition of piracy and the penalties and procedures for dealing with it were set down in legislation dating from the reign of Henry VIII. Under the statute of 1513, felons accused of piracy stood trial within the realm, a provision hopelessly impractical in an age of colonisation when the scene of the crime was several thousand miles beyond English soil. Greater state commitment to suppress pirate activity was displayed by the enactment of legislation that sought to enforce the rule of law in maritime areas falling under the jurisdiction of the British crown. In 1699 parliament passed ‘An act for the more effectual suppression of piracy’, which delegated the authority to arrange trials for piracy to Admiralty courts convened in the colonies themselves, provided that the juries in each case consisted of at least seven persons. This act also extended the definition of piracy to persons receiving goods stolen at sea, or otherwise assisting pirates and rendered them liable to the penalties specified in the original Tudor statute, which included the possibility of death, loss of lands, and loss of goods and chattels.

The 1699 act was kept in force by renewals in 1706 and 1713, while an additional act passed in 1722 made it easier to try accessories to piracy in local Admiralty courts, declaring that it was illegal to ‘trade with any Pirate by Truck, Barter, [or] Exchange ... supply ... or ... anyways consult, combine, confederate, or correspond with any Pirate’. In 1717, moreover, by proclamation of George I, direct action was mounted against the pirate menace. A taskforce of thirteen naval frigates was assembled and charged with mounting a campaign against pirate vessels, while colonial governors were also exhorted not to tolerate pirates operating within their area of jurisdiction. By way of an incentive, bounties of £200 were offered for persons succeeding in bringing notorious pirate leaders to justice, while in December 1717 pirates were offered a general amnesty to entice crews to surrender themselves to the authorities.

Although the aggregate cost-benefit calculation of removing piracy from the seas remained much as before, the distribution of the costs and benefits within the legal trading community had altered in ways that made it increasingly likely that public resources would be marshalled against sea robbers. The best known instance of damage to private interests leading to calls for the provision of public goods actually occurred in the East India trade, when the government was lobbied into taking action by the consequences of the capture of the daughter and treasure ship of the Great Mogul in 1696 by Henry Avery. In response to the attack, the Great Mogul threatened the English East India Company with reprisals should English-born raiders commit any further outrages. When one powerful trading organisation shares disproportionately in the harm inflicted on legitimate commerce by criminals, it raises the probability that the government will be persuaded to take action. In the Caribbean arena other special interest groups similarly began to feel that their interests were directly threatened by pirate activity. The buccaneers in their early days had displayed strong anti-Spanish tendencies and inflicted damage on Spanish South Sea settlements. While Spain continued to claim, with Portugal, an exclusive right to America under the papal Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), the usefulness of the buccaneers to the British authorities in diverting Spanish resources was clear.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Madrid in 1670, however, Spain finally recognised English possession of the strategically vital colony of Jamaica and permitted English ships freedom of movement in the Caribbean provided each country agreed to refrain from trading in the other’s territory.

Whereas the second half of the seventeenth century had seen ten major West Indian islands and the mainland colony of New York change hands amongst European nations, the period between the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13) and the Seven Years’ War (1756-63) was characterised by stable territorial possession. The new climate of relative peace and security exercised influence on Jamaica, where investment in sugar planting had been held back for fear of possible Spanish invasion and turbulent political conditions on the island. Following the Treaty of Madrid the governor of Jamaica, Sir Thomas Modyford, who had been sympathetic towards piracy, was replaced by Sir Thomas Lynch who adopted a policy of suppression. As Jamaica’s economy developed pirates ceased to be valued as violent defenders of English interests bringing wealth to the island in the form of plunder, and were perceived more as uncontrollable elements that rendered property rights less secure and who were capable of provoking Spanish reprisals in the form of a clampdown on the lucrative clandestine trade that was developing between Spanish and English colonists.

In 1660 the Royal Africa Company was chartered to supply the Americas with slaves. Over the remainder of the century the attitude of this politically influential organisation towards piracy underwent significant changes. Soon after commencing business the company attempted to break into the lucrative but illicit trade of supplying slaves to Spanish America, but its aim
was frustrated by the better organised Dutch and Genoese merchants. Piracy was initially viewed by the Royal Africa Company as a potential source of advantage by disrupting the trade of its competitors and the company even resorted to attempting to blackmail Spanish governors with the threat of piracy unless their negroes were taken by their colonies. By the later seventeenth century the company had adopted a new corporate strategy in response to altered diplomatic relations between England and Spain and was rewarded by a provision in the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) which granted it the Assiento, an exclusive contract to supply Spain’s American colonies with 4,800 African slaves annually for thirty years. British slave traders who profited from the Assiento were anxious to maintain good relations with the Spanish crown and also concerned for the security of ships carrying payment for slaves delivered to the Spanish West Indies. Since the Royal Africa Company’s shareholders included the king and prominent members of the royal family, its potential influence on the shaping of government policy towards piracy was considerable. In a similar vein, the increase in piracy following the ending of both the War of the League of Augsburg (1688-97) and War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13) placed pressure on the institutions designed to protect traders from its worst effects. London merchants who organised the insurance market for ships and cargoes dispatched to the Americas responded to increased uncertainty and risk by joining the coalition of forces calling for action.

The decline in the incidence of piracy was associated with an improvement in the prospects of former indentured servants. Although the chances of gaining independence through land ownership remained worse than had been the case over the first half of the seventeenth century, the material standard of living increased and the life expectancy of settlers rose in compensation. The founding of Pennsylvania in the 1680s and its subsequent rapid growth generated new possibilities of personal improvement in a region of America that became known as ‘the best poor man’s country’. In attempting to suppress piracy in Nassau the British authorities adopted policies that were tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. Under the governorship of Captain Woodes Rogers approximately £100,000 was invested in the development of the island of New Providence between 1718 and 1720. To encourage former pirates to give up criminal activity Rogers offered an amnesty, free grants of land and a minimum daily wage to persons willing to do work improving the infrastructure of the port. In the Nassau experiment the public and private sectors worked in partnership, most of the finance being raised by a London syndicate and by Rogers himself. After 1720 the problem of piracy in the Americas remained confined to only a few areas, chiefly the coastline off North Carolina. Throughout the Americas as a whole a generally improving economic climate assisted direct state action against piracy and brought about a reduction in the threat of sea robbery. The main locus of pirate activity shifted away from the Caribbean and into the more attractive eastern waters of the China trade. Here piracy was to remain a thorn in the flesh of British officials and a threat to trade in these quarters a century after its demise in America. A network of islands around the mouth of Canton River, including the future Hong Kong, succeeded the islands of the Caribbean as the home of what Portuguese merchants called the ‘Ladrones’, or bandits.


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Poacher turned gamekeeper: Woods Rogers relieves Spanish colonists of their jewellery during his privateering raid on Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1709. He subsequently attained respectability as Governor of the Bahamas.