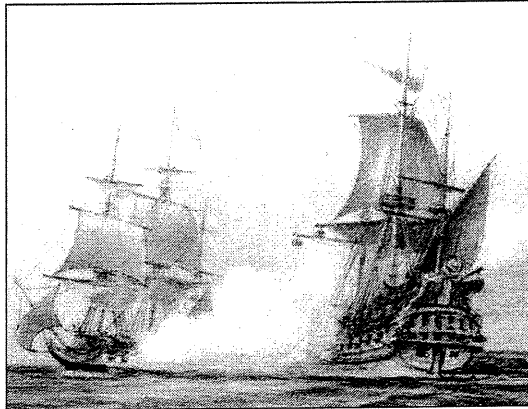


Privateers: Plundering in the Name of the King

It is common knowledge that pirates were fierce, murderous sea dogs who attacked and plundered, sailing ships to steal any treasure they might be carrying. But what if the pirate's life of crime was legal? What if it was acceptable, or even encouraged, to attack another ship for its booty?

This is exactly what happened when monarchs and governments used privateers during times of war in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Privateers were sailors who used pirates' dastardly methods of assault to gain riches, but who were actually authorized by their home countries to capture and plunder merchant ships belonging to enemy nations. This authority was usually given in the form of a Letter of Marque, an official commission giving permission to seize or destroy enemy ships.



Robert Charles Leslie, *Life Aboard a British Privateer* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), 102.
<<http://www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/warship.html>>.

While privateers came from all over the world, privateering ships in the Atlantic Ocean came primarily from Britain, the United States, Spain, and France (four countries that were almost always at war with each other). Nova Scotia was an ideal base for British privateering in North America because of its location – the colony was close to the busy sea lanes of the North Atlantic and to the US, a favourite target of British ships. Nova Scotia was particularly active as a base for privateers during the War of 1812.

Technically, privateers operated only during times of war and only against enemy ships. However, privateers often became carried away by their pillaging, and the line between privateering and piracy could be a thin one. Privateers could and did exceed the bounds of their assigned commissions by attacking ships from neutral and friendly nations. The Letter of Marque was sometimes even used as an excuse for the possession of plunder from non-enemy ships.

Although Letters of Marque were recognized by international convention, and meant that privateers could not technically be charged with piracy while attacking the targets named in their commissions, whether or not a prisoner was considered a pirate often depended on which nation had captured him. Spain refused to recognize privateers from enemy nations, and Spanish authorities often executed foreign privateers with their Letters of Marque hung around their necks.

Most privateers were men, but women privateers existed as well. Many of these privateering women were French, including Jeanne de Monfort (known as "The Flame") and Jeanne de Clisson (known as "The Lion of Brittany").

Some famous male privateers include Sir Francis Drake (an Englishman who enjoyed the patronage of Elizabeth I); Woodes Rogers (an Englishman who eventually became governor of the Bahamas); and Rene Duguay-Trouin (a Frenchman who became an admiral in the French navy). Elcid Barrett, from Stan Roger's sea shanty "Barrett's Privateers," is probably the best-known fictional privateer.

For centuries, privateering flourished and accomplished privateers were respected and admired. However, the signing of the Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law as part of the resolution of the Crimean War in 1856 ended the glory days of privateering. Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Prussia, Russia, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire agreed not to hire privateers in the event of war. During the American Civil War the United States announced that it would follow the rules of the Paris Declaration. Other countries agreed to the Declaration when it was ratified at the Hague Convention of 1907, which focused on naval law.

Privateering played an exciting role in a period of world history when the country that could rule the seas could control most of the world. Although privateers are not quite as exotic as pirates, the two groups are closely related.

Some interesting resources about privateers include:



- Roger Marster's *Bold Privateers: Terror, Plunder and Profit on Canada's Atlantic Coast*. This extensively-illustrated history of privateering contains stories of many of the individuals and ships involved in privateering in the Maritimes and New England during the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The book would be useful for school history assignments or casual reading. (Ages 15+)
- *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. This film, based on a series of novels by Patrick O'Brien, tells the story of a British

sea captain charged with capturing a French privateering ship. Won two Oscars and starring Russell Crowe. Rated PG-13. (Ages 13+)

Robert Vaughan, *Portrait of Sir Francis Drake* (circa 1540-96). National Library of Australia <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an9348508>>.