

whether in courtrooms or private homes or a public house. Thus, what is to be understood in the law is much more localized and quotidian than the grand accounts of nation states. Yet even as one makes this criticism and feels this frustration, one also suspects that is and has been exactly the point of the work—there is no history of the law, or at least not one that avoids the “zigzags”—as Dunn describes it—of the past.

Steedman’s book is both beautifully written and hard to read; as is appropriate for the topic, she refuses to let the reader jump ahead or to skip over the details. This is a readerly work that requires one to settle in and to consider word choice and how one topic is juxtaposed with another. Perhaps in its own way this forces a linearity through the zigzags of past and present, legal rights and wrongs, and the way that law is loved and lived.

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DAVID WILSON. *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021. Pp. 312. \$130.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.32

Until the last decade, the prevailing historiography of early modern piracy in the Atlantic world held that the British Royal Navy stamped it out in the 1710s and 1720s through short, sharp campaigns of pirate hunting that culminated in exemplary trials and executions. This scholarship primarily focused on the pirates themselves at their Golden Age peak, and explained their suppression as the story of a powerful imperial state manifesting its fury in an effectual, centrally-coordinated campaign of extermination.

In *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*, David Wilson delivers a more comprehensive and nuanced account of the last gasp of the Anglo-American pirates (1716–1726) and the myriad, often uncoordinated counter-piracy efforts that brought about their downfall. In Wilson’s telling, the internal coherence and effectiveness of the imperial state in this period has been overstated, with the result that scholars have accorded too much credence to the idea of an organized war on pirates. Centering his analysis on the patchwork of institutions and actors that made up the British empire, Wilson draws together the disparate incentives and activities of the metropole and the periphery to tell a more complex story about how piracy was all but eradicated in the 1720s.

Suppressing Piracy is organized geographically and chronologically, roughly following the general movement of pirates from their Caribbean center to friendlier hunting grounds as they faced increasing resistance. Wilson’s detailed introduction provides the reader with an overview of the systemic factors that led to large-scale piracy in the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, along with the cultural, legal, and logistical challenges facing those who sought to combat it. The book’s seven chapters form three broad groups. In chapters 1, 2, and 3, Wilson addresses piracy and counter-pirate activities in the Caribbean and Atlantic islands from 1716 to 1718. Wilson discusses the conditions following the War of Spanish Succession that produced a surplus of men ready to turn to piracy, examining also the derisory efforts of both the metropole and the colonies to protect Caribbean trade, and the public-private partnership that eventually eliminated a major pirate haven in the Bahamas. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, he explores counter-piracy efforts between 1718 and 1722 in the North American colonies, around the slaving forts of West Africa, and in the Indian Ocean.

In the final chapter, Wilson addresses the more peripheral areas to which pirates eventually fled in 1723–1726, analyzing the combination of factors that pushed the sea robbers into politically and economically marginal areas, where they faded to insignificance.

Throughout the book, Wilson validates his early warning to the reader that *Suppressing Piracy* “contains pirates . . . [b]ut it is not a book primarily about pirates” (xi). He keeps attention squarely on the actors responding to maritime predation: colonial governors and assemblies, naval officers, and, above all, overseas merchants from both the metropole and the colonies. Skewering the contention that counter-piracy was an “organized imperial project” (22), Wilson argues that the state’s decision to apply scarce resources to counter the threat of piracy in any given area was invariably a response to the specific and contingent demands of centrally powerful merchants, and not necessarily part of a larger plan. Examples from across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds demonstrate that the imperial apparatus was most reliably prompted to action when pirates threatened an important trade for which there existed an influential metropolitan political constituency. This distinction emerges sharply from the chapters on the Caribbean and North America. The Board of Trade, the Admiralty, and the Privy Council devoted attention and resources to defending critical nodes of the sugar and tobacco trades only when the London merchants who advised them—and who held votes in Parliament—made clear that concerns about these trade hubs were not limited to colonial elites. Likewise, the Royal Navy’s counter-piracy patrols to West Africa and the Indian Ocean emerged out of lobbying by influential independent slavers and the Royal African and East India Companies. Wilson supports his argument particularly persuasively with discussion of the 1722 naval expedition to the Indian Ocean. Though only four pirate crews actually visited the Indian Ocean from 1716 to 1726, the East India Company managed to wrest from the state the largest single anti-piracy operation of the period, consisting of four large warships—which then encountered no pirates at all.

Wilson provides similarly detailed accounts of the various other elements of the piecemeal campaign, through which he illustrates and emphasizes the composite and disjointed nature of the early modern British empire. He demonstrates that the imperial center did not conduct all, or even most, anti-pirate activity; such central institutions as existed had limited attention and resources, and their capacity for action at the empire’s edges was hampered by the challenges of distance, communication, and oversight. It was nearly impossible for the center to execute any but the most straightforward policies or strategies at the periphery without the close cooperation of local elites. Even for the Royal Navy, strong central control was more myth than reality; naval officers routinely ignored laws and regulations and subverted Admiralty orders to carry on illicit trade for their own enrichment. Colonial officials were often more interested in—and sometimes even more capable of—fighting pirates, and they funded and executed much of the campaign by manning and equipping sloops and other small vessels for local defense. Some of the most effective operations—like the destruction of Blackbeard’s pirate gang in North Carolina—resulted from the ad hoc joint efforts of imperial and local stakeholders.

Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century is an impressive and important work of scholarship that nevertheless manages to remain readable and accessible to the nonspecialist. Though more tightly scoped, Wilson’s book stands alongside Mark Hanna’s *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570–1740* (2015) in offering an authoritative account of the inchoate British empire’s role in ending the age of Atlantic piracy. The book will prove invaluable both to scholars interested in the workings of the early modern British empire and to students of piracy, and it deserves a wide readership.

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