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The
Pirate Gow

An account of the conduct and
proceedings of the late John Gow alias
Smith, Captain of the late pirates,
executed for murder & piracy committed
on board the George gally, afterwards
call'd the Revenge; with a relation of
all the horrid murders they committed
in cold blood; as also of their being
taken at the Islands of Orkney, and
sent up prisoners to London

by Daniel Defoe

with an introduction
by Nigel Rigby

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Original spelling, grammar and punctuation retained throughout

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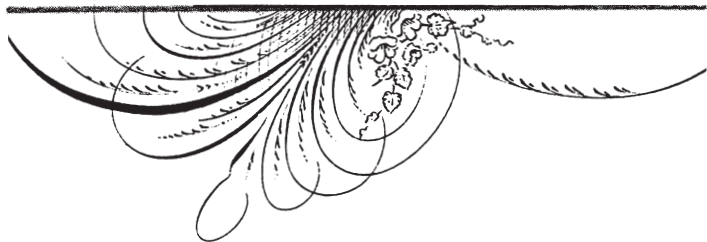
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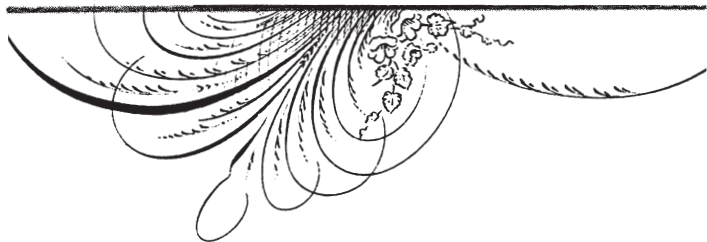


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INTRODUCTION

by Nigel Rigby

In 1814, the novelist Sir Walter Scott was travelling in the Orkneys where he later recalled meeting ‘an old hag’ who told him a tale about ‘Gow the pirate, who . . . came to his native country about 1725 with a *snow* [a two-masted ship] which he commanded; carried off two women from one of the islands, and committed other enormities’ before being captured by the islanders and sent to London, where he was tried and hanged. Recognizing a good story when he heard one, and adding material from Captain Charles Johnson’s *A General History of the Pirates* (1724–28), which included a chapter on Gow, Scott incorporated both the pirate and the ‘hag’ into his novel, *The Pirate* (1822).

Some find even the best of Scott a little hard-going today, and it has to be said that *The Pirate* is not a sprightly read. It is chiefly remarkable for the way in which Scott takes the real, deeply unpleasant John Gow and turns him into the colourful hero, Captain Cleveland, the sole survivor of a pirate ship wrecked on Sumburgh Head. The charming but sinister Cleveland poses a threat to the islands, as did Gow, but by the end of the novel he redeems himself, repents his former life, joins the Navy and dies honourably. While Scott uses elements of Gow's story, Captain Cleveland is as much a part of a long romantic tradition stretching back hundreds of years. It is most famously exemplified by Johnson's *History*, a book which went through many editions and of which the modern historian of the subject, David Cordingly, has said 'publicized a generation of villains' from what has become known as the Golden Age of Piracy, giving 'an almost mythical status to men like Blackbeard and Captain Kidd'. The romance of piracy subsequently produced a long list of fictional heroes and attractive anti-heroes, from Byron's *The Corsair*, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* (where the pirates are all noblemen who have gone wrong), R.L. Stevenson's Long John Silver, Burt Lancaster's athletic captain in *The Crimson Pirate*, to Johnny Depp's memorable Captain Jack Sparrow.

As *An Account of the Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow* (1725) shows only too well, there was precious little romance in the true story of its subject, whose career as a pirate was nasty and brutish but mercifully short. It began in November 1724 with the bloody murders of his captain, first mate, the supercargo and surgeon on the *George Galley* off Santa Cruz (Agadir), and ended with his capture in the Orkneys and execution in London less than nine months later, on 11 June 1725. Gow had the misfortune to turn pirate towards the end of the 'Golden Age'. Piracy probably reached its height in the second half of the seventeenth century, briefly declined from the beginning of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1701, when the English government encouraged buccaneers to fight for their country, but flourished again with the ending of the war in 1713, when naval ships were laid up and seamen laid off. The government's attitude to freebooters had long been slightly ambiguous, with much shading around the edges of privateering (which was legal), piracy (which was not) and buccaneering (which wavered uncertainly between the two), but such was piracy's dramatic growth after 1713 that with the appointment of the ex-privateer Woodes Rogers as governor of the Bahamas, Britain declared a zero tolerance approach to it. Within ten years the most notorious pirates had been killed or captured and executed.

All executions were then popular public events and those of Gow and his crew were no exception. They took place at Execution Dock, Wapping, the traditional site where pirates were hanged at the low-water mark and their bodies left dangling for the washing of three tides. The *Dublin Journal* reported on 17 June 1725 that for Gow's execution the Thames was so crowded with small boats and that the 'prodigious concourse of persons' caused such 'mischief' that 'several lives [were] lost in the water and on the shore'.

According to the *Journal*, the pirates contemplated their imminent demise with insouciance, behaving 'themselves since their condemnation with an air of sensibility, and . . . under no apprehension of death or sense of their crimes.' The rope around Gow's neck broke after he had been hanging for four minutes and the anonymous author of the *Account* describes him mounting the steps to be hanged once more 'with very little concern.' This is very much how pirates were supposed to behave on the gallows, as careless of their own lives as they were of their victims'. However, another contemporary account has it that Gow 'beg'd heartily (tho' boldly), that he might not be hang'd again till the executioner whip'd him off and dispatched him with some thumps on the breast.' After being cut down from the gallows, pirates' bodies were

customarily tarred and gibbeted (hung in chains to disintegrate slowly as a public warning to seamen) and this was the fate of Gow and his lieutenant, Williams, who were gibbeted facing each other on either side of the Thames near Greenwich.

Gow was twenty-eight at the time of his death. He was born in Thurso around 1697 and moved as a child to the Orkneys with his merchant father William and his wife Margaret, who brought him up in Stromness. Gow (Gobha in Gaelic) was once a common name in Scotland, the equivalent of 'Smith' in English. Many Gows anglicized their names to Smith from the early eighteenth century and this was the name that Gow assumed when he returned to Orkney in the captured *George Galley* in 1725. Legend has it that he ran away to sea, although exactly when is unknown, as is anything of his career prior to a first unsuccessful attempt to turn pirate on a ship homeward bound from Lisbon earlier in 1724, and his second successful attempt on the *George Galley* later that year. The *George*, a merchant ship of 200 tons and 26 guns, commanded by the Guernseyman, Captain Ferneau, was actually called the *Caroline* and identified as such by a merchant in the Orkneys, who had seen the ship a year earlier in Amsterdam. After the mutiny in which he seized her, Gow and his crew rechristened the ship *Revenge* and only changed the

name to *George* on arrival in Orkney in order to avoid suspicion.

The *Account* of Gow presents a matter-of-fact picture of pirates, one which helps dispel many of the myths that have grown up around them. As his dispute with Williams shows, pirate captains were only as good as their last capture and had little job security; they were elected by their crews and could be replaced by a vote. Equally, a strong pirate captain was not afraid to act quickly and brutally to keep his position. Pirates were not merely lawless thugs, however, and their ships often had written constitutions. These were rather more than the 'guidelines' of the Pirates' Code in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, spelling out clearly the rules of behaviour and the punishments and rewards, in particular the 'share' of the plunder each man was to receive. Not all captured crews were slaughtered indiscriminately: Gow actually behaved rather well to his captives, allowing all of them to live. Crews were not always willing pirates: a large proportion of Gow's were effectively pressed men and their uncertain loyalty influenced a number of his actions. The escape of ten of the crew in the longboat in Orkney was the deciding factor in Gow's eventual capture. The plundering of canvas, rope and anchors from prizes, even when otherwise worthless, also points to the isolation of pirates living outside society and their need to be self-

sufficient. Pirates could also be men of limited intelligence whose actions were determined more by chance and fate than cunning. Some of Gow's decisions were odd, to say the least, and while his determination to quit the Spanish and Portuguese coasts and refit in Orkney shows the rapidly diminishing number of pirate-friendly ports where ships could resupply and repair in the early eighteenth century, it was this misjudgement when compounded by basic navigational errors that led directly to his capture.

The episode there takes up more than half of the book. In many ways this is understandable as it was the public shock of pirates operating so brazenly and brutally in British waters that made Gow's capture such a *cause célèbre*. It is also in Orkney that the story moves from being told from the pirates' viewpoint towards that of the Orcadians, particularly Gow's captor and erstwhile school-friend, James Fea. The story did not end happily for Fea, however. He was lauded for his bravery and cunning in capturing a vastly superior number of heavily armed and desperate men, and was said to have received as a result substantial sums of money from the government, from the salvage of Gow's ship and from grateful merchants, but he was bedevilled and impoverished by law suits that followed in the wake of the case. In *The Real Captain Cleveland* (1912), his descendant, Allan Fea, tells how James espoused

the cause of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745; in the reprisals following the Battle of Culloden his main house was plundered and burnt to the ground by Hanoverian forces, ironically meeting the fate that his house on Eday had escaped when he outwitted Gow.

The anonymously written *An Account of the Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow* was published on 1 July 1725 by John Applebee of London. It was reprinted under the title of *An Account of the Conduct and Proceedings of the Pirate Gow* in 1898, in a limited edition of 250 copies. The editor, John R. Russell, then made two claims in his Preface: that the 'the only original copy that can be found is in the British Museum' and that the evidence that it was written by Daniel Defoe is 'unquestionable'. Russell was writing in good faith and using the best information available at the time, but he was wrong on both counts. A copy was also in Boston Public Library, USA, another is currently in Orkney Museum, Stromness, a fourth in the collections of Orkney Library and Archive and a fifth was discovered by the collector, Phillip Gosse, bound up in a fourth edition of *A General History of the Pyrates*. This, and the rest of his important collection of pirate literature, came to the National Maritime Museum's Caird Library in 1939 when it was purchased from him by the Museum's founding benefactor, Sir James Caird.

The belief that Defoe was the author goes back to the early nineteenth century. It was partly based on internal evidence of similarities of style with other works by Defoe, but also on the fact that Defoe worked from 1720 for the original publisher, John Applebee, who specialized in rogues' histories. The attribution was reinforced through the research of J.R. Moore in the 1930s, who attributed over 500 titles to Defoe.

The argument additionally depended on the fact that a short version of Gow's story had also appeared as a chapter in the third edition of *A General History of the Pyrates*, published a month after the *Account*, in August 1725. The *General History* is undoubtedly a key source for what we know today about pirates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it too was first published anonymously, before the name of Captain Charles Johnson as author was added; and of Johnson nothing is known but the name. For J.R. Moore, the authors of both the *General History* and the *Account* are one and the same man, which is a reasonable assumption. Moore claimed, however, that 'Johnson' was in reality the pen-name of Daniel Defoe, who thus wrote both works.

This argument was questioned in the 1980s and 90s by P.N. Furbank and W. Owens, who reduced Moore's list of 500 works 'known' to be by Defoe by nearly half, to 290,

and even questioned the fundamental assumption that Defoe worked for Applebee. Modern scholarship tends to follow Furbank and Owens' caution. In the most recent biography of Defoe both the *General History* and the *Account* of John Gow are excluded as being either 'not Defoe's or probably not Defoe's'. Nonetheless, the latest edition of the *General History* (reprinted in 1999) still attributes it to Defoe, although accepting that there is no proof of either position, and that this is now unlikely to be found. In my view, the arguments on both sides are strong, but perhaps it is best to forget them and enjoy instead the opportunity to read a great story that has been difficult to find for far too long.

Further Reading

Paula Backsheider, *Daniel Defoe: his life* (1989)

David Cordingly, *Life among the pirates: the romance and the reality* (2007 edition)

Peter Earle, *The Pirate Wars* (2004)

Allan Fea, *The Real Captain Cleveland* (1912)

Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* (2004)

Manuel Schonhorn, ed., *A General History of the Pyrates* (1999 edition).

Sir Walter Scott, *The Pirate* (1822)