

Dutch Pirates

Why Dutch pirates never swing from a rope onto a British ship, a knife between their teeth and a pistol in their belt, to kill the captain with a sabre and get the girl

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[HAN VAN DER HORST]

When it comes to buccaneers and pirates the Netherlands is no match for the United Kingdom, not as far as the rest of the world is concerned at any rate. Dutch literature has no *Treasure Island*. Neither did it have Hollywood on its side to complete what Robert Louis Stevenson had begun, first with Errol Flynn and then with Johnny Depp. That is why Sir Harry Morgan and Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach are known around the world, while no one has heard of Cornelis Jol - otherwise known as Peg Leg (*Houtebeen*) - or Claes Compaen.

Neither did the Netherlands have a Queen Georgiana, who personally went on board the Golden Hind to knight Francis Drake after his journey round the world. Her Dutch counterparts are the lofty members of the States General, in their habitual black garb, who voted for a marble tomb for the privateer Piet Hein but only coughed up the money for it when his widow threatened to settle the bill herself. It can still be seen in the Oude Kerk church in Delft.

Yet the whole romanticization of the buccaneers started with a book that was published in Amsterdam in 1678, *De Americaensche Zeerovers*. Written originally in Dutch by Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin, a French ship's surgeon, it immediately became a bestseller and was translated into English, under the title *The History of the Bucaniers [sic] of America*, and many other languages. All the scenes in the Errol Flynn films can be traced back to descriptions in this book. The same is true for *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Legendary buccaneers like François l'Olonnais, who ate the hearts of captured Spaniards, and Harry Morgan, the great freebooter from Port Royal in Jamaica, were made famous by Flynn. The problem is that Exquemelin had hardly any followers in the Netherlands. Dutch authors have rarely been inspired by homegrown pirates. An exception to that rule was Dick Dreux, a social-democrat with a kind of historical social awareness who, in *Free Trade (De Vrije Nering, 1956)*, described the rise of a poor outcast who manages, after a career on the island of Tortuga in the Caribbean, to make it to regent in the widely admired commercial city of Amsterdam. Along the way he learns that a conscience and love for his fellow human beings only get in the way of social success in the early capitalist society. Dreux enjoyed a certain renown amongst kindred spirits. His books were sold with great success by the socialist publishing house De Arbeiderspers in the fifties and sixties of the last century, but Dreux was never officially recognised as 'real' literature, a judgement that should perhaps be revised.



Watergeuzen

Then there is Rum Island (*Rumeiland*) by the then highly respected author Simon Vestdijk. However, it plays in the eighteenth century in Jamaica and there is not a single Dutchman in it. The only privateer that really comes to mind in the Netherlands is Piet Hein, whom we mentioned above, and that is only because of a nineteenth-century folk song, written for the founding of the young nation by the poet doctor Jan Pieter Heije and composed by Johannes Josephus Viotta:

Piet Hein his name's quite short
 But what a feat, oh what a feat
 He's beaten and captured the silver fleet.

*Piet Hein zijn naam is klein
 Zijn daden bennen groot,
 Hij heeft gewonnen de zilveren vloot.*

Michiel de Ruyter might get a mention too, but the Dutch know him only as an admiral and naval hero - despite the fact that his surname is derived from the long-forgotten Dutch verb *ruiten*, meaning to plunder and ravage. That though

Piet Hein captures the Spanish Silver Fleet in the Bay of Matanzas, Cuba (1628)



Piet Hein, Delfshaven, Rotterdam

is about it. Nonetheless, seizing other people's ships played just as important a role in Dutch history as in British history. Piet Hein and Cornelis Jol were by no means the only ones. Indeed pirates were at the root of Dutch independence. The English Queen Elisabeth I played an important role in this as well, by opening her ports to the Watergeuzen, Calvinists rebelling against the Spanish King Philip II, who also ruled over the Netherlands.

Initially the Geuzen, or beggars (so called for the silver begging bowl they took as their symbol), formed an aristocratic movement demanding religious tolerance and respect for the local rule of law. When they got literally no response to their petition the more radical elements began a revolt that was put down harshly by Philip II's commanders. Some of the survivors started a guerilla war in the woods, but most fled out to sea, on fishing boats and other largely unimpressive vessels, where they made a living by piracy. They sold their booty in British ports – not golden treasures, but whatever they could grab from a little two-master or a couple of loads of grain from Baltic vessels.

In the name of Orange, open up!

The Watergeuzen referred to themselves not as pirates but as privateers. Indeed you might say they had permits to operate, the so-called letters of marque, that were granted to them by Prince William of Orange, the founder of the Dutch House of Orange and one of the main leaders of the rebellion. Unlike common piracy, privateering was a regular part of waging war. Enemy ships were captured, not sunk, as they were by German U-boats in the Second World War. Privateers were therefore also supposed to leave neutral ships alone, not to mention those on their own side. But all too often that rule was disregarded, not least by the Watergeuzen, who were known on the North Sea as unpredictable, cruel, merciless and all too often mad.

Nonetheless, embroiled in a sort of cold war with Philip II, Elisabeth allowed them into her ports. In the winter of 1572, however, a period of détente broke out and the Queen closed her ports to the Watergeuzen. A disastrous turn of events for any pirate. Catching merchant vessels and fishing boats offers no comfort if there is nowhere to dispose of the booty. Many a pirate has roamed the sea with a full hold but hungry and thirsty because there were gallows waiting in every port. The Watergeuzen had to choose between certain ruin on the North Sea and onward flight. In the Dutch town of Den Briel, which they attacked, they lived up completely to their reputation for cruelty (their practices and religious fanaticism being similar to those of Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's jihadists). However, the Watergeuzen did bring about a large-scale popular rebellion that paved the way for the first independent Dutch state, the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. Subsequently they were skilfully sidelined by more moderate forces, but the same generation that sang the song about Piet Hein lauded their deeds in an ode too:

*In the name of Orange, open up!
The Watergeuzen are at the gates of Den Briel.*

*In naam van Oranje doe open de poort
De watergeus staat voor Den Briel.*

Piet Hein, 1629.
Copy after a lost original by Jan Daemen Cool
from 1625



Ears nailed to the deck



Darcana Entertainment
or Pirates today

The tradition of piracy covered by letters of marque continued to be just as profitable though. The inhabitants of the island province of Zeeland applied themselves to this, in particular, as their source of income. With the flag of the lofty gentlemen of the States General on the masthead – a yellow background with a red lion on it bearing seven arrows – they hunted down ships flying the Spanish flag. But their own merchant navy was not safe either, because the Spanish King had in turn given letters of marque to seafarers from the pious Catholic city of Dunkirk (Dunkerque), which is now in France. These privateers were interested not only in the cargoes but in the crews too, who were held captive in the most wretched conditions until a high ransom was paid or death ensued. Suffering this fate as a fifteen-year-old boy, Michiel de Ruyter was one of the few that managed to escape and make his way on foot through the hostile Flemish countryside back home to the privateers' port of Vlissingen, in Zeeland. The Dutch did not play the ransom game. Dunkirk seamen who fell into their hands were likely to be nailed by the ears to the deck of their own ship before it was sunk.

The most coveted catch for one of these privateers was a Spanish galleon full of treasures from New Spain, or a Portuguese carrack laden with spices from the Far East. Stories abounded in every port of whole fleets of ships laden with silver, which gathered in the Bay of Matanzas in Cuba ready for the crossing to Cadiz in Spain. Sir Francis Drake had once captured a couple of silver ships, but since then they had sailed home unscathed. In the Far East, too, English and Dutch merchants knew of a legendary black ship that ventured the crossing between Manila in the Philippines and Acapulco in Mexico, once a year. But, though it was much sought after, none was ever found.

The short and wretched lives of privateers

In the seventeenth century the authorities mistrusted economic freedom, which was associated in their minds with anarchy. Production by the various trades was controlled by the guilds and they wanted to control seafaring as well. England and the Netherlands each formed an East India Company that was given the monopoly on trade with the Far East. By analogy with this model, the Republic of the Seven United Provinces also established a West India Company, with the exclusive right to develop commercial activities in the two Americas. The Board of Directors of the West India Company, the *Heren XIX* or Lords XIX, appear to have understood this to mean privateering against the Spanish enemy in particular. Piet Hein and Cornelis Jol both sailed in the service of this company. The result was that the largest portion of the booty disappeared into the shareholders' pockets, while the crews had to make do with a bonus that was barely any bigger than their annual pay. It was Piet Hein who, in 1629, after many attempts in the Caribbean – both successful and failed – got his hands on a silver fleet. Worth around twelve million guilders, it was enough to reward the shareholders richly and to finance the siege of 's-Hertogenbosch, a heavily fortified town considered to be impregnable due to its location in the middle of a marsh. Thanks to the millions from the silver fleet the marshes could be drained and empoldered in

the tried and tested Dutch fashion, after which 'Den Bosch', as the town is known colloquially, fell. When it became clear how little of the booty was left for the privateers who had captured the silver fleet, they rioted in Amsterdam. No one who risked his life sailing for the West India Company ever became rich. Piet Hein barely outlived his greatest success, dying fighting privateers from Dunkirk, and Cornelis Jol died of malaria on the island of São Tomé before the coast of Africa. Privateers' lives were short and the end was often wretched.

In search of other work

Privateering came to an end when the lofty members of the States General and the Spanish crown finally made peace in 1648, after eighty years of war. The province of Zeeland investigated whether it could continue the war on its own, as the loss of privateering against Spanish ships would cost it so much of its income. It could not. The Dunkirk privateers had to look for other work too. Their business enjoyed a brief revival in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when seamen from the city – under the French flag now – obtained letters of marque from Louis XIV to attack the Dutch navy. It was during this period that the most famous Dunkirk privateer, Jan Baert, lived. Admitted to the pantheon of great French heroes under the name of Jean Bart, he died - unlike most of his colleagues - in bed, succumbing to pneumonia in 1702.

Rock Braziliano (in fact born in Groningen ca. 1630) was one of the more successful Dutch pirates in the Caribbean.

He was a brave man, a fine sailor and a dangerous psychopath.



West-Indisch huis, headquarters
of the West-India Trading
Company, Amsterdam



Barbary

Those interested in real free trade did better to go to the Mediterranean where Muslim pirates, referred to as Barbary pirates, besieged Christian shipping from ports on the North African coast. The crews invariably ended up on the slave market but could usually be redeemed by their families. There was another way out though. Those who converted to Islam were often able to join the pirates. During the first few decades of the seventeenth century a number of Dutch seamen were happy to take this opportunity; others volunteered. They were usually privateers who wanted to be able to flaunt the booty they had fought for so bloodily themselves and were not prepared to hand it over to greedy shareholders with mansions beside a canal in some Dutch city. The most famous of these was Simon de Danser, from Dordrecht, who ended up owning a whole pirate fleet based in the port of Algiers. He was known along coasts everywhere as *Dali-capitan* or Devil Captain.

A certain Jan Janszoon, who took the name Murad Raïs after his conversion, operated from the Moroccan city of Salé. His most famous exploit is a slave raid on Iceland. But the most notorious of these Dutch privateers in Barbary attire was Claes Compaen, who called himself the *Neptune and King of the Sea*. He, likewise, operated out of Salé. After coming to an arrangement with the authorities in the Netherlands, however, Compaen returned in his old age to his native village of Oostzaan, northwest of Amsterdam. That is not as strange as it may seem. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European rulers tried to buy off attacks on ships sailing under their flag more often than they sent out an expensive war fleet to track down the pirates. The lofty members of the States General, too, usually tried to placate the Barbary pirates with money and fine words, even though they occasionally sent out a fleet to give them a bit of a fright.

From rope-maker to admiral

The Dutch naval hero Michiel de Ruyter led one such expedition. The British knew very well what he was capable of after he sailed up the Medway in 1667 and did immense damage in the dockyards where the British fleet was laid up. He sailed off with the flagship, the Royal Charles, as war booty, proving that he was still a privateer at heart. In classic Dutch history teaching the raid on the Medway was seen as the perfect opportunity for teachers to give full rein to their storytelling abilities. In the nineteenth century, too, a popular song was composed about Michiel de Ruyter - by Richard Hol, a contemporary of Viotta - commemorating his rise from humble origins as a rope-maker's apprentice to admiral of the formidable fleet of the lofty members of the States General:

*Clad in a blue check smock
The great wheel he turned all day
But Michiel's boyish heart was anguished
Aye, aye, aye, aye!*

*As a matelot swift and trim
He went on board - as befitted him -and sailed
To East India and the West, ah that was the life
Hoho, hoho, hoho, hoho!*

*And now he's the Admiral of Holland
Made of fire and steel, the terror of the seas
A real trooper, glorious on his horse
Heave-ho, heave-ho, heave-ho, heave-ho!*

*In een blauwgeruiten kiel
Draaide hij aan 't groote wiel den ganschen dag
Maar Michieltjes jongenshart leed ondragelijke smart
Ach, ach, ach, ach!*

*Als matroosje vlug en net
Heeft hij voet aan boord gezet, dat hoorde zo
Naar Oostinje, naar de West, jongens dat gaat opperbest
Hojo, hojo, hojo, hojo!*

*Daar staat Hollands Admiraal
Nu een man van vuur en staal, de schrik der zee
't Is een Ruiter naar den aard, glorierijk zit hij te paard
Hoezee, hoezee, hoezee, hoezee!*

Classic Dutch history teaching - now sacrificed to the urge for renewal - was intended to offer subsequent generations an example of the heroes of the seventeenth century, known in the Netherlands as the Golden Age. Freedom fighters and naval heroes like Horatio Nelson were better suited to that than

Juan Bautista Maino, *The Recapture of Bahia*, 1635 © Museo del Prado.
The Dutch captured Salvador de Bahia from the Portuguese in 1624.
It was recaptured by the Portuguese in 1625.



pirates, which is why Piet Hein has been put in the same category as Michiel de Ruyter. He has been elevated to the glory of the naval heroes and his piracy has been relegated to the background. Real pirates like Simon de Danser or Claes Compaen are known only to specialists. This may explain why the Netherlands has never developed pirate literature, and why no Dutch pirates have lodged in the collective memory and popular culture, like Blackbeard Teach and Harry Morgan have. Although Arne Zuidhoek, a respected expert in this field, has combed the archives and found thousands of names of Dutchmen who were actively involved in classic piracy – not privateers that is, but real pirates – not one of them ever became really famous or even notorious.

Anti-piracy

The Netherlands and the United Kingdom have been united in the global battle against piracy for two centuries now. In 1815 a Dutch-British fleet bombarded the city of Algiers to such an extent that the local rulers considered it would be wise to stop allowing piracy from their ports. These days Dutch and British naval ships patrol the coast of Somalia. Even France has taken part - with a frigate bearing the name *Jean Bart*, ironically enough. And there is no question now of backing down. In the ports along the coast, people must know that pirates may set sail but they do not come back.

However, none of this changes the painful awareness that Dutch literature has never produced a character that can match Long John Silver. On the big screen we shall never see a Dutchman with a knife between his teeth and a pistol in his belt, swinging with a rope onto a British ship to kill the captain with his sabre and get the girl.

Pity. A real pity. ■