Joseph Fatzinger

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Not Your Typical Pirate

During the Golden Age of Piracy, pirates roamed about the seas terrorizing helpless merchants and colonies. Pirates were viewed by civil society as murderers, savages, and merciless barbarians. Eventually the government decided that piracy was a plague that must be annihilated at all costs. In order to complete this task, the English government started enforcing harsh punishments for those who acted in piracy and those who aided in piracy. One such pirate was Philip Roche.

Scholars and Historians may look at Philip Roche and ponder if he was an abnormal pirate, or just like any other traditional Buccaneer. The fact of the matter is that Roche is quite different from the normal pirates of his time. Him and his crew approached pirating in a completely different manner. They focused more on subtlety, than on raiding large merchant ships. Roche has a fascinating account of his expeditions, capture, and execution; all of which show a different side of piracy.

Before looking at the ways that makes Philip Roche different from the normal pirate, first a question must be answered: what were the characteristics of a normal pirate of that time? Contrary to popular belief, must pirates were not actually nasty looking men with long beards, missing limbs, and a parrot resting upon their shoulder.[[1]](#footnote-1) Pirates themselves usually came from poor uprising, were often old soldiers, and many times sailors looking for work. Piracy was a lifestyle chosen by these men, and occasionally women, to simply earn a living. Pirates were more civil than most think. They held rules, elected their leaders democratically, and gave compensation for men who lost limbs in battle. But pirates did of course raid, pillage, and kill. This was an unavoidable part of the job, as we will now discover looking at the story of Philip Roche.

Philip Roche was raised in Ireland, but was sent away because there wasn’t a satisfactory life for him. It is obvious that he is as ambitious as any. He never settled and worked hard on the seas in order to make himself look like a gentleman. Roche soon became impatient of waiting to become a wealthy man and decided to take a different and illegitimate approach to success. Roche discovered a few other men Pierce Cullen, Andrew Cullen, Francis Wise and Richard Neale, who were also tired of slowly working themselves to success and were motivated to piratical acts. This group went on to accomplish quite a few unlawful activities, the most popular of which we will consider with detail.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The piratical instance we will be observing takes place around the year of 1722 near the waters of France, England, and Ireland. Philip Roche is now around the age of 30. He boards a small French Vessel which was known as a Snow. Philip Roche wasn’t alone, he was accompanied by his companions that were previously mentioned. The ship belongs to a French man named Pierre Tartoue, who was unsuspecting of the group’s true intentions.

. The Captain trusted him and his crew to watch over the ship while the rest of the crew rested. Roche and his sinister accomplices barbarously slaughtered a few of the crew that were awake and finished those that were asleep. The Captain and fist mate of the vessel was awoken to his entire crew having been slaughtered. The captain begged for mercy but was granted none. He even asked for a moment to pray, but this harmless request was denied. Roche bound the Captain and first mate together and threw them overboard.[[3]](#footnote-3) Roche’s group took control of the ship in such a violent fashion, that it conformed with society’s belief that pirates were all despicable creatures

After finishing the massacre, the villainous crew dubbed Roche master of the newly acquired ship. Because it was a rather well-known vessel, the crew of Roche painted their ship a different color from the original and changed the name to *Mary*. Roche himself took the name of John Eustace, so he himself could not be traced. Unlike normal piratical behavior, the newly formed crew of Roche acquired a variety of goods and posed as merchants. They continued to secretly take in passengers and their goods, to than kill them and take their goods. This unruly group of sailors moved from port to port lying and stealing their way to fortune. This proved rather successful for a time.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As with most evil deeds, eventually honest people will start to become aware. Roche and his crew then decided it was time to part ways due to the attention they were receiving. In order to avoid arrest, Roche went aboard a different ship and sailed to Ireland. Carelessly he wrote a letter directed at his wife which was discovered and was ultimately his downfall. The English military was made aware of piratical activities led by a man named “John Eustice’. Having discovered the letter, the authorities captured John Eustice and brought him to England to stand trial for his crimes of piracy and murder.

During the examination, it was brought forward that “John Eustice’ was in fact a man known as Philip Roche. Roche denied these allegations at first, stating he never knew a man of that particular name. Unfortunately for Roche, the letter for his wife referred to him as Philip Roche. After this revelation, Roche was forced to admit that he was in fact Philip Roche. He was offered the opportunity to provide testimony against his recently captured companions and he himself would be pardoned. Being a malicious man, Roche had no problem with offering up his companions in exchange for his freedom from the noose.[[5]](#footnote-5)

During his time in prison, Roche often visited the Chapel and spent a large amount of time writing. According to sources, he was behaving very well during his confinement. While in prison, his associate Neal had poisoned himself and died in a horrible manner. Roche showed no grievance and even stated that he believed he deserved it. In similar fashion, the remainder of his companions had also taken their own lives in prison. This event gave Roche a change of heart. Having learned that his comrades had suffered cruel deaths he begins to believe that he, being the mastermind of the criminal events, also deserved to pay for his consequences. In his last moments, he met with a minister to make his peace before his death. On August 14, 1723 Philip Roche was executed at Execution-Dock due to the crimes of Piratical activity and Murder of Peter Tartoue.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Having completed this story it is important to analyze the documents that were used as sources. Most of the documents are newspaper articles from a London article in the 1720’s. It would be fairly safe to assume that these articles are accurate, although there could be some bias since pirates were viewed poorly at this time. Other documents tell the story from the perspective of the criminals themselves. These could have been portrayed differently, although it appears the criminals didn’t leave anything out. In all it appears the sources can be trusted for the main reason that there isn’t much contradiction between all the documents.

The story of Philip Roche shows us many interesting aspects of piracy that often goes unnoticed. First it shows how civil society reacts to Pirates of that time. When the English Military became aware of piratical activity taking place near its waters, even though it was on a small scale, it acted to combat such events. The governments of France, Ireland, and England believed it was a necessity to put a stop to criminal activities on the seas.[[7]](#footnote-7) Looking at the news articles of that time, society clearly had a negative view on pirates. The media of the time glorify the punishments that pirates receive and illustrates them as villains.

Secondly, this presents an interesting question, how successful was Philip Roche as a pirate? On the surface, some may believe that he was not successful for two reasons. He was captured and executed; and he wasn’t a captain of a large ship taking down massive merchant ships. Roche was a successful pirate, although it was on a smaller scale. He successfully captured a sea vessel and disguised it as his own. He then continued to plunder other ships and obtain their goods. He did all of this without financial support, unlike the bigtime pirates of the time.

Finally, this intriguing tale of Philip Roche shows how he was different than the “typical” pirate of the Golden Age of Western Piracy. As we discussed normal pirates were in crew members of fairly large vessels and sailed the Caribbean and Atlantic raiding merchant ships. Roche was different. He took a very small group of men and secretly took possession of a small ship in violent fashion, doing so he conformed to society’s general opinion that pirates were barbarians. His posse then went on to stay in secret at prey upon small ships. While this is all considered piratical activity, this is far from different to the ways a typical pirate acted.

In conclusion, Roche and his crew’s story showed a different kind of Western Pirating. The group lied, killed, and raided in a secret style to disguise their devious deeds. While Roche was convicted as a typical pirate, his actions show otherwise. From the begging to the end of his story, it is clear that Philip Roche is not your typical pirate.

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