



*Pirates*

Susan Ronald

THE PIRATE QUEEN

Elizabeth I, her pirate adventurers

and the dawn of empire

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Deftly interweaving contemporary accounts with colourful details, Susan Ronald guides us masterfully through an Elizabethan world inhabited by "colourful rascallions" and "indomitable sea dogs", who roam the seas seeking plunder, glory and new lands. While these adventurers might be motivated primarily by greed, Elizabeth was in desperate need of cash to finance the defence of her beleaguered realm. The ultimate "success" of her pirates was to undermine the golden foundations of Philip II's Spain and to blaze a trail towards a British empire. Every good story needs a dashing hero, and the "ingenious" Sir Francis Drake dominates this narrative. Drake himself worried that "You will say that this man who steals by day and prays by night in public is a devil", but he has nothing to fear from Ronald, who similarly cannot hide her affection for the "vintage" brilliance of Queen Elizabeth.

Ronald tells her story well, but it is a time-worn tale. It was told first by Elizabethan pamphleteers and Spaniards who felt less inadequate in the face of an invincible foe. It was told again by the Victorians, seeking precedents for their own imperial ambitions. We have romanticized pirates: Tudor wordlists define "pirate" simply as "robber by sea". When the Spanish admiral Santa Cruz branded Elizabeth I the "pirate queen", it wasn't meant as a compliment. Pirates still exist: since 2002, the International Maritime Bureau has recorded 258 pirate attacks in the treacherous Malacca Strait (which Drake sailed close to in 1579). Ronald does not quite manage to shrug off the "heroic pirate" myth to produce a clear-eyed account.

In a year in which we commemorate the abolition of the slave trade and sixty years of Indian independence, we cannot ignore the fact that Sir John Hawkins and his backers sought profit from human cargoes, while Drake and Raleigh claimed territory for their Queen that was already inhabited. There is a new story that is emerging in current scholarship, which remains to be told to a wider audience, as multifaceted as any pirate's plundered diamonds. It is the painful, but hopefully more truthful, story of how these early encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans in the sixteenth century shaped the challenging world we live in today.

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