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The Pirate Queen: Elizabeth I, her Pirate Adventurers and the Dawn of Empire, by Susan Ronald

Elizabethan buccaneers may have laid the foundations of Empire, but should we really regard them as heroes?

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The Walt Disney Company has more of an impact on the writing of history than many of its practitioners would like to admit. Ever since Johnny Depp and his pals made an impact on the imaginations of cinema audiences, there has been a steady flow of books dealing with pirates, privateers and buccaneers of all kinds. Susan Ronald is, however, the first to claim a monarch for the genre. Her case for doing so is sound enough, in that the nickname "pirate queen" was actually bestowed on Elizabeth I in her lifetime, by one of the admirals of the Spanish Empire, which was the main target of her marauding subjects. It provides Ms Ronald with a catchy title for the latest retelling of the whole Elizabethan saga of maritime adventure, in which the English suddenly broke out of home waters for the first time, to raid, trade and explore around the globe, from Cape Horn to the Arctic, and from Panama to the East Indies.

Ms Ronald was brought up in the USA, and writes in American, primarily for a readership on those shores. The whole point about the events that she recounts is that they represent the ultimate origins of the United States. At a deeper level, the values that her book celebrates are those of modern America: rampant private enterprise and business acumen, put to the service of the national good and pitted against an evil empire characterised by despotic rule and religious fundamentalism. Put another way, it is a remarkable throwback, to the blood-and-thunder Victorian histories that turned the Elizabethan "sea-dogs" into modern heroes, and role models for a later age of aggressive capitalism and world leadership. It makes a neat illustration of the way in which figures and themes can carry over from one superpower to another.

Ms Ronald's grasp of the background to her tale is a shaky one. There are minor errors of detail when filling in the domestic political scene: the Northern Earls of 1569 become dukes, Robert Cecil gets a marquisate instead of an earldom, and so on. As she shifts her gaze abroad, the mistakes get bigger, the worst being that she confuses two decades in the history of the Netherlands, turning the gallant and effective Spanish general there in the 1580s, the prince of Parma, into the author of the atrocities of 1576. This basic lack of knowledge makes her heroine, the queen herself, a somewhat one-dimensional character, conceived of largely at second hand. If her stage-sets are pasteboard and daub, however, the main characters that strut in front of them are magnificently portrayed. Here she has done her work well, from a range of original sources, and once she gets on board ship, the events that she narrates are properly understood and provided in full and vivid detail.

Here, to the life, and for a contemporary age, are all the adventurers in their talents and imperfections. The spotlight, properly, is fixed on Sir Francis Drake himself, a man of rigid loyalties and commitments – to the Protestant religion, to his nation and queen, to discipline among his crews, to vengeance on the Spanish for past wrongs and (most attractively) to a code of honour that made him deal gallantly with his victims. Beside him we find the rest of the gallery: red-haired, dashing, dressed Hawkins, the meticulous planner; the psychopath Gilbert, who boasted of killing women and children; the fantasist Frobisher, always claiming the discovery of vital sea passages and of gold mines, and always wrong; and the charismatic, vain, persuasive and prickly Raleigh, a perfect salesman and maniacal egotist.

Should we, however, regard them as heroes at all? Here Ms Ronald's own richness of narrative gives her problems. It is perfectly plain that the main force driving these men was greed, and in their scramble to satisfy it they did not merely inflict large-scale suffering on fellow Europeans and native populations, but lied to their government, squabbled and competed viciously with each other, and bungled most of their own schemes. The message of the book seems to be, to misquote a modern American statesman defending a nasty Latin American regime, that at least they are our bunch of bastards. Even that, however, involves negotiating an awkward wobble of sympathies. Ms Ronald is fairly confident that readers are not going to worry too much about the Spanish, but it is no longer permissible to be so equable about atrocities against black Africans, native Americans and the Irish, and her Elizabethans committed the lot. Even judging by results involves some doubt: by the end of the reign England still had no American colonies and no fast trade routes to the orient, and the Spanish Empire was still intact, having suffered no significant blows except in prestige. The book's ultimate justification for treating Elizabeth's oceanic adventurers as significant is that they carried out the essential reconnaissance work on which later and more solid achievements were built. Matched against their own targets, however, they were crashing failures, and the successes of the next century were due in part to a change of tactics by both governments and entrepreneurs. Still, the fact that her book provokes such thoughts indicates that Ms Ronald has succeeded in two of the main tasks of a historian: to tell a good tale, and to encourage debate. *

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