

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 8

Issue 2 *Volume 8, Issue 2 (Spring 1999)*

Article 9

4-1-1999

Kris E. Lane, Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas, 1500-1750

Peter Gerhard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Gerhard, Peter. "Kris E. Lane, Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas, 1500-1750." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 8, 2 (1999): 236. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol8/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas, 1500-1750. By Kris E. Lane. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. xxiv + 236 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$58.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

While *Pillaging the Empire* uses a few colonial documents from the National Archive of Ecuador, this is basically a summary of previously published works on the conflict between Spain and her European rivals on both sides of North and South America in what the author calls "the early modern era (c. 1450-1750)" (p. xvi). It is a good synthesis, enlivened with diversions on "Early modern money," "Elizabethan-era navigation," "Shipbuilding in the 17th century," "Gambling in the 17th century," "Early modern shipwreck salvage," and "Sea food, or the pirate diet."

Kris Lane begins with a trenchant chapter on the background of religious conflict, commercial rivalry, and piracy in the Mediterranean, and the technological preeminence of western Europe which allowed its civilization

to spread over much of the planet in the sixteenth century. This introductory essay would have benefited from the classic work of Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean world at the time of Phillip II, of which the English translation is far better than the original French edition. Subsequent chapters deal with the challenge of the English and French, and later the Dutch, to the Iberian New World monopoly, followed by the golden age of the multinational buccaneers. It was in the seventeenth century that Spain's enemies settled on islands throughout the Caribbean and on the mainland in logging camps and pirate bases from Panama to Tabasco. Most of these islands and enclaves, deserted or by-passed by the Spaniards, remain—long after the suppression of piracy—culturally and linguistically English, French, or Dutch, with a hodgepodge of native American and African strains, a legacy of the western European scramble for wealth and domination which transplanted millions of Africans to replace, as workers, the millions of Native Americans who succumbed to Old World diseases. The slave trade and piracy were closely related institutions.

The historian who relies mostly on secondary sources is condemned to repeat their mistakes and shortcomings. Thus Lane, placing unmerited confidence in a book written forty-odd years ago by this reviewer, misdates the voyage of John Oxenham, the first Elizabethan to pillage the Spaniards in the Pacific (p. 43), and deficiently recounts the adventures of some late-seventeenth-century buccaneers (pp. 154-57). Gerhard's ignorance of Dutch is also reflected in Lane's treatment of Holland's wars against Spain (Chapter 3), a gray area soon to be illumined, it is hoped, by Engel Sluiter in a long-awaited book. Incidentally, Lane cites and praises Sluiter's doctoral dissertation (University of California at Berkeley, 1937), a preliminary work on the same subject, but apparently did not use it because "it remains practically impossible to lay hands on" (p. 208). Why, with all the modern technology now at our disposal, should consultation of a doctoral dissertation be practically impossible? It was not so in 1952. Why, one might ask with heuristic intent, cannot today's historians roll up their sleeves and go to work in an archive? There is a thrill and satisfaction in pouring over dozens of *legajos* and finally discovering a good primary source. Besides the English, French, and Dutch, other Europeans (among them Danes, Swedes, Courlanders, Scots, and Knights of Malta) had colonies in the West Indies during the heyday of piracy, and it might be worthwhile to look into the contemporary records of those nations. Much also remains to be done in research of contraband trade, akin to piracy, which lasted well into the nineteenth century, a quest which might take an enterprising scholar to Massachusetts (Salem, New Bedford), England (Bristol), and even Russia (Saint Petersburg).

This said, there is much to be commended in this book. Its author has obviously had access to a well-organized library, something denied to

historians of most Hispanic-American nations. He has produced a well-illustrated (except for a map on page 19 which is almost illegible) condensation of a vast amount of literature. His book deserves success as a college text, while hispanophone students would benefit from a Spanish edition.

Peter Gerhard
Fayence, France