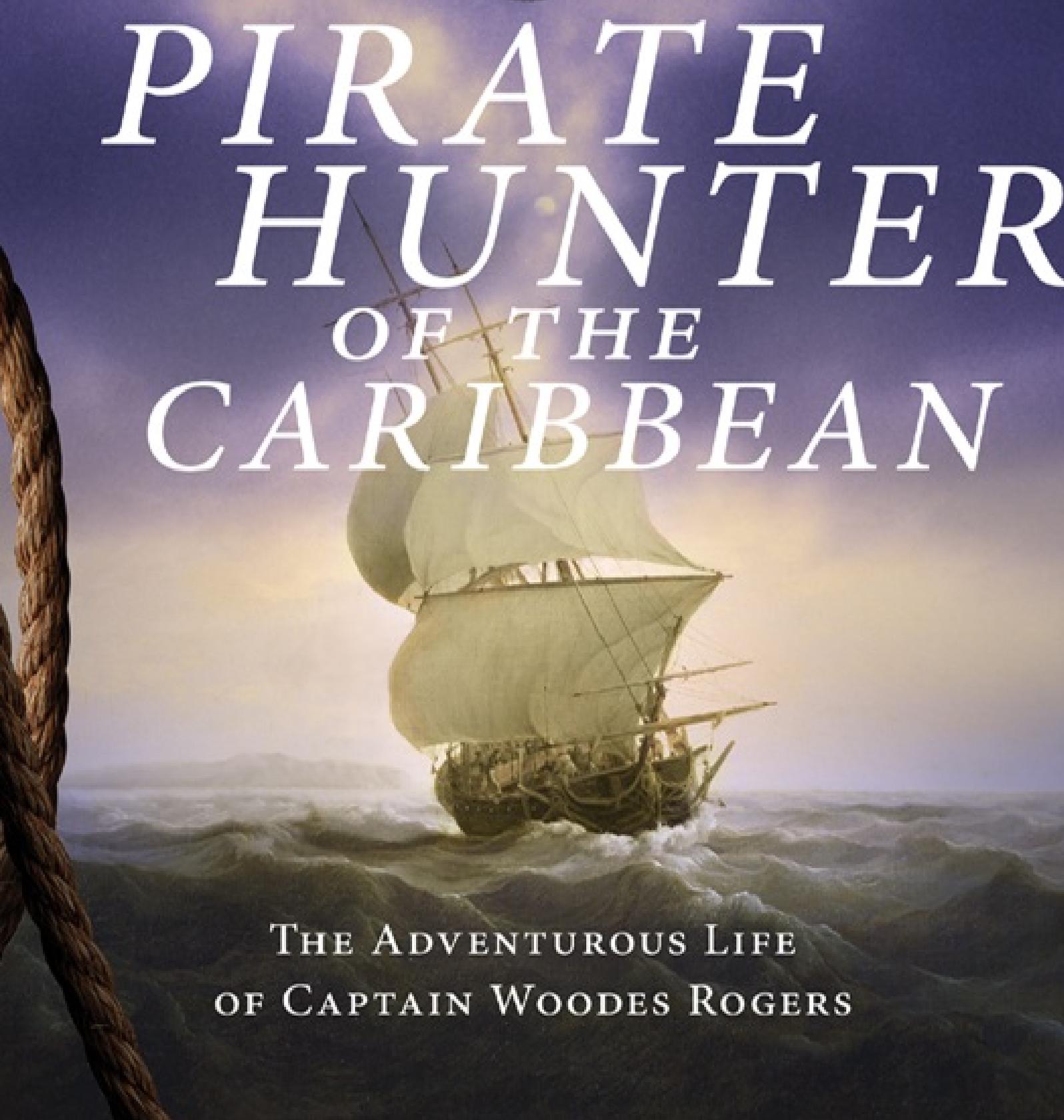


DAVID CORDINGLY

AUTHOR OF *UNDER THE BLACK FLAG*



*PIRATE
HUNTER
OF THE
CARIBBEAN*

THE ADVENTUROUS LIFE
OF CAPTAIN WOODES ROGERS

ALSO BY DAVID CORDINGLY

Cochrane: The Real Master and Commander

Under the Black Flag:

The Romance and Reality of Life Among the Pirates

Seafaring Women: Adventures of Pirate Queens,

Female Stowaways, and Sailors' Wives

PIRATE HUNTER
OF THE CARIBBEAN

*The Adventurous Life
of Captain Woodes Rogers*

DAVID CORDINGLY



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For Shirley

CONTENTS

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Author's Note

Maps

Prologue

- 1 Raiding the South Seas
- 2 The Sea Captain
- 3 From Bristol to Cape Horn
- 4 A Man Clothed in Goat-Skins
- 5 The Manila Galleons
- 6 The Voyagers Return
- 7 Sugar, Slaves and Sunken Treasure
- 8 Governor of the Bahamas
- 9 Welcome to Nassau
- 10 Hanged on the Waterfront
- 11 Blackbeard's Last Stand
- 12 Calico Jack and the Female Pirates
- 13 Great Debts and Bills
- 14 Death on the Coast of Guinea
- 15 Back to the Bahamas

Epilogue

Photo Insert

Glossary

Notes

Bibliography

Acknowledgments

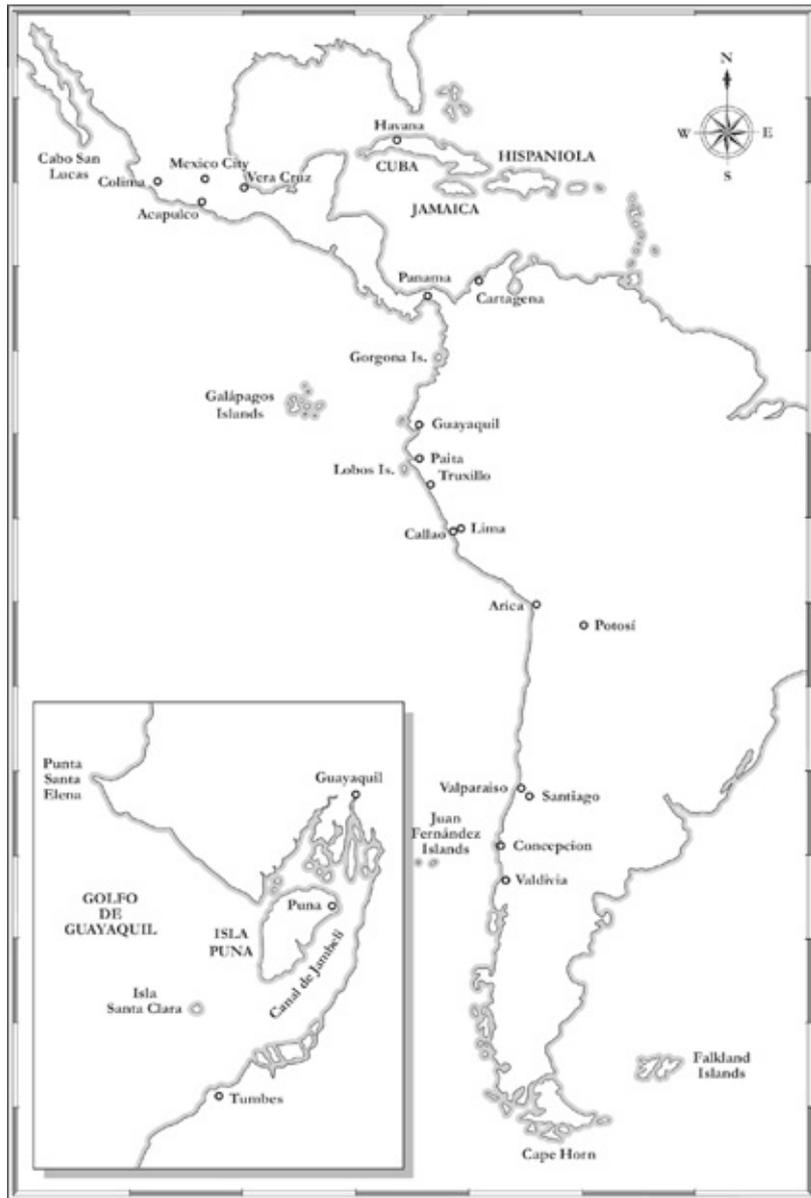
About the Author

Author's Note

The Juan Fernández Archipelago consists of three islands and a rocky islet. The largest island, which used to be known as Isla Más a Tierra, is the only one which has ever been inhabited and is the one which the buccaneers and later seafarers called Juan Fernández. In 1966 the Chilean government renamed this island Isla Robinson Crusoe, and the smaller, uninhabited island 112 miles to the west (formerly called Isla Más Afuera) was renamed Isla Alejandro Selkirk. The third island in the group was, and still is, called Isla Santa Clara, and the rocky islet is called Islote Juananga. I have followed the usage of the early seafarers and always refer to the large island by its original name, as in this quote from Woodes Rogers' journal, 'At seven this morning we made the Island of Juan Fernandez.'

During the course of this book I have used the terms 'pieces of eight', 'pesos' and 'Spanish dollars' depending on the source of the information. All three terms apply to the same silver coin which was worth eight *reales* and was the common currency used throughout Spain's empire in the New World for more than three centuries. One side of the coin had the Spanish coat of arms and the other side usually had a design which included the pillars of Hercules. The twin pillars symbolised the limits of the ancient world at the Straits of Gibraltar and these eventually formed the basis of the dollar sign used today. In 1644 one piece of eight (or peso or Spanish dollar) was valued in England at four shillings and sixpence. That would be the equivalent of about £18 or US \$28 today.

In their books, Woodes Rogers and Edward Cooke usually anglicised the names of the Spanish ships which they encountered. I have used the Spanish names for Spanish ships and smaller vessels. However, I have retained the archaic spelling of *Dutchess* and *Marquiss* for the English ships because these are the names given to them by the privateers.

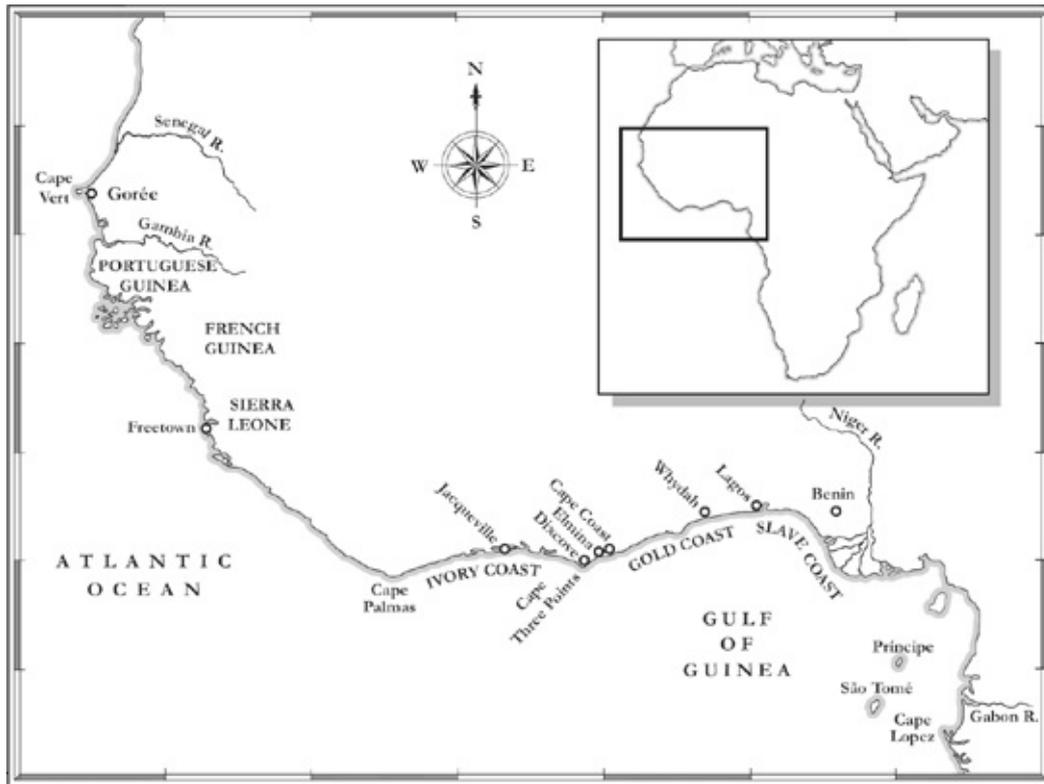


Map of the Pacific coast of South and Central America showing the places associated with the buccaneers and with Woodes Rogers' privateering expedition.

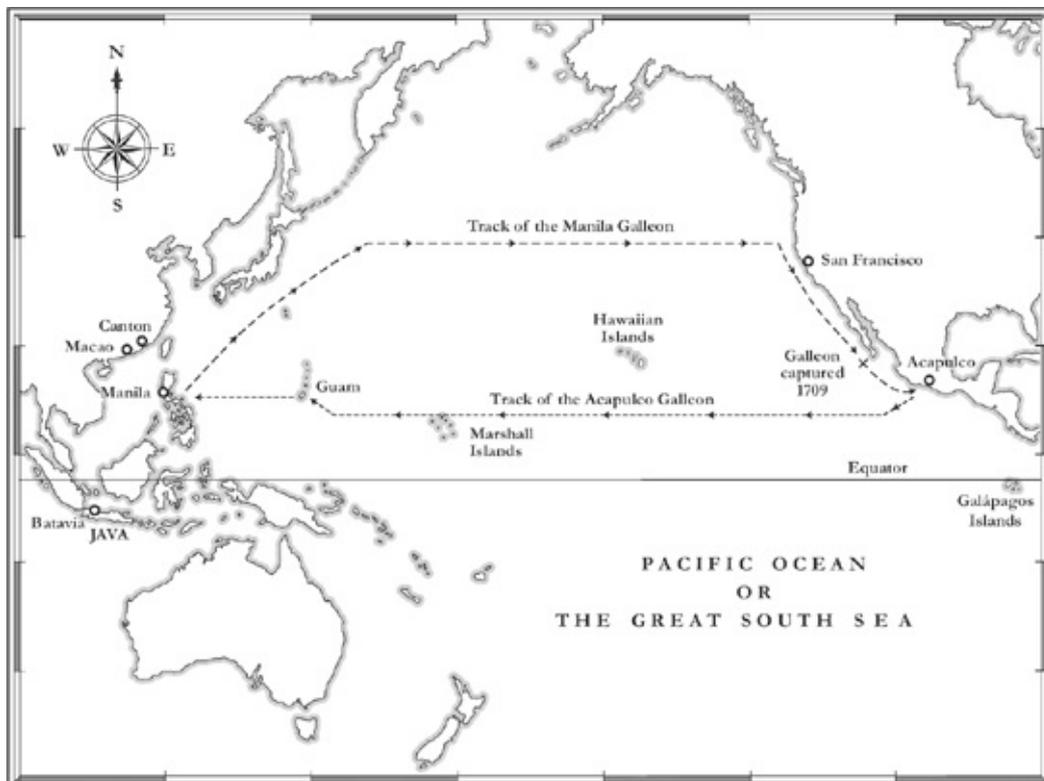




Map of the Caribbean and Central America during the time of the buccaneers, privateers and pirates of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.



Map of the coast of West Africa showing the harbours and trading posts visited by the pirates of Bartholomew Roberts and naval ships sent to hunt them down.



Map of the Pacific to show the tracks of the eastbound Manila Galleon and the westbound Acapulco Galleon.

Prologue

In the autumn of 1717 the following item appeared in a London newspaper: 'On Wednesday Capt Rogers, who took the Aquapulca Ship in the South-Seas, kissed his Majesty's hand at Hampton Court, on his being made Governor of the Island of Providence in the West Indies, now in the possession of the Pirates.'¹

Behind this brief statement lies an extraordinary story. It is the story of a tough and resolute sea captain who led a privateering raid on Spanish ships in the Pacific, rescued a castaway from a deserted island and then played a key role in the fight against the pirates of the Caribbean. It is also a tale of treasure ships and treasure ports, of maroonings and hangings, and the genesis of Daniel Defoe's most famous book, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. The story is played out against the background of fierce colonial rivalry between Britain, France and Spain; and it is linked with the fabulously rich trade in gold and silver from Central and South America, the trade in silks and spices from the Far East and the shipment of black slaves from the west coast of Africa to the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Many of the events centre on two groups of islands: the Bahamas and the remote archipelago of Juan Fernández in the South Pacific.

For several years the harbour of Nassau in the Bahamas was the base for a roving band of pirates which included many of the leading figures of the so-called Golden Age of Piracy – figures such as Ben Hornigold, Charles Vane, Calico Jack, Sam Bellamy and Edward Teach, otherwise known as Blackbeard. This nucleus of 'loose and disorderly people' produced a generation of pirates whose operations extended from the Caribbean to the east coast of North America as far as Newfoundland, and across the Atlantic to the slave ports of West Africa and beyond to the Indian Ocean. The usual explanation given for this explosion of piracy is the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which brought an end to eleven years of war and caused Britain, France and other maritime powers to reduce the size of their navies. This threw thousands of redundant sailors on to the streets of coastal towns and cities. Unable to find work elsewhere, some of these seamen turned to piracy. They were joined by the crews of privateer ships who had been legally authorised by letters of marque to attack enemy shipping when their country was at war but, with the declaration of peace, were tempted to exchange their national ensigns for the black flag of piracy.

Redundant sailors and privateers were certainly among the crews of the pirate ships but there were other events which sparked off the alarming surge in piracy following the Treaty of Utrecht. The first was the wrecking of a Spanish treasure fleet on the coast of Florida in 1715. This attracted sailors

and adventurers from across the Caribbean to go ‘fishing on the wrecks’ for Spanish gold and silver. The second was the misguided action of the Spanish in expelling the logwood cutters from the Bay of Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico and the Bay of Honduras. Described by one observer as ‘a rude, drunken crew, some of which have been pirates, and most of them sailors’,² the logwood men alternated the laborious work of cutting down the valuable logwood trees with extended bouts of heavy drinking. When the Spanish seized the ships involved in the logwood trade, the cutters migrated to Nassau, which was already being used by the treasure hunters as a base for their operations. The sheltered harbour on the north coast of the island of New Providence in the Bahamas became a magnet for a motley group of seafaring men who found piracy to be an easier and more profitable occupation than life on a merchant ship or cutting logs in the steamy jungles of Central America.

Colonial governors sent disturbing reports back to the Council of Trade and Plantations in London. In 1718 the Governor of South Carolina asked for the assistance of a naval frigate to counter ‘the unspeakable calamity this poor province suffers from pyrates’³ and the Governor of Jamaica reported that ‘there is hardly one ship or vessel, coming in or going out of this island that is not plundered’.⁴ The situation was most critical in the Bahamas, where there was so little provision for the defence of the islands that most of the law-abiding inhabitants had fled, ‘whereby the said islands are exposed to be plundered and ravaged by pirates and others, and in danger of being lost from our Crown of Great Britain’.⁵ It would be the task of Captain Woodes Rogers to rid the islands of the pirates and to put an end to the raids of Spanish privateers.

The Juan Fernández islands were a refuge for generations of mariners who had rounded Cape Horn and survived the icy storms and mountainous waves of that bleak region. It was here that several buccaneer ships called in for wood and water in the 1680s. During one of these visits a Miskito Indian called Will was inadvertently marooned, his rescue three years later being witnessed and recorded by William Dampier. And it was on the same island that the most famous of castaways, Alexander Selkirk, was abandoned in 1704 after an argument with Captain Stradling, who had parted from an ill-fated privateering expedition led by Dampier. When Captain Woodes Rogers dropped anchor off the island four years later he and his crew were greeted by ‘a man clothed in goat-skins, who looked wilder than the first owners of them’.⁶ On his return to London after his successful privateering expedition Rogers published a book entitled *A Cruising Voyage Round the World* which described his raid on the town of Guayaquil and his capture of a Spanish treasure galleon, and included vivid accounts of faraway anchorages and exotic native peoples. But it was his detailed description of how Selkirk survived his lonely ordeal on Juan Fernández which proved of more interest than anything else which took place during the epic voyage of the two Bristol ships under his command.

The driving force behind the early privateering expeditions into the Pacific, and the raids of the buccaneers and the pirates in the West Indies, was the age-old lure of gold and silver. Ever since the conquest of the Aztec civilisation in Mexico by Hernando Cortés in 1519, and the brutal overthrow of the Inca ruler in Peru by Pizarro in 1533, a constant stream of gold and silver bullion had been transported by mule trains across the mountains and through the jungles of South and Central America to the treasure ports of the Spanish Main. On the hot and humid waterfronts of Nombre de Dios, Portobelo, Cartagena and Vera Cruz the precious cargoes of gold and silver, together with spices, hides and hardwood, were loaded on to ships which sailed first to Havana in Cuba for refitting and victualling, and then across the Atlantic to Seville and Cadiz in Spain.

The treasure galleons were an irresistible target for British, Dutch and French privateers. In 1523 the French corsair Jean Fleury intercepted three Spanish ships off Cape St Vincent as they neared the end of their homeward journey. He attacked and boarded the vessels and found their holds filled with the treasure which Cortés had looted from the Aztecs. There were three cases of gold ingots, 500 pounds of gold dust, 680 pounds of pearls, coffers of emeralds and Aztec helmets, shields and feathered cloaks. The quantity of treasure shipped across the Atlantic rose steadily during the sixteenth century and was given a spectacular boost with the discovery in 1545 of the silver mountain at Potosí in Bolivia (then part of the vice-regency of Peru). The great cone of the mountain known as Cerro de Potosí soared to 15,827 feet (4,824 metres) above sea level and proved to be one of the richest sources of silver ore in the world. By 1650 the sides of the mountain were peppered with mine shafts and at the base of the mountain there was a town of more than 160,000 people – larger than Amsterdam or Madrid. The Spanish were reliant on local Indians for extracting and refining the silver, but working at such a high altitude was exhausting and thousands died from the hard labour, the brutal treatment and mercury poisoning. Although there were 150,000 black African slaves working in Peru and the Andean region in 1640, it was found that the Africans were unable to work with their usual energy in the rarefied air of Potosí.⁷

The treasure ships which transported the silver across the Atlantic were so vulnerable to the attacks of swift, heavily armed privateers that in 1543 the Spanish instituted a convoy system with fleets of up to 100 vessels being escorted by warships. This measure proved so effective that it was rare for any ships to fall into the hands of predators. When they did so the rewards for the captors were enormous. In 1628 the Dutch admiral Piet Hein intercepted one of the treasure fleets in the Bay of Matanlas on the north coast of Cuba and captured four treasure galleons and eleven smaller vessels. The total value of the gold, silver and trade goods taken was more than eleven million guilders, enough to fund the Dutch army for eight months and ruin Spanish credit in Europe that year.

In addition to the treasure fleets or *flotas* making their regular crossings of

the Atlantic there were treasure galleons which made annual crossings of the Pacific. In 1571 the Spanish had founded a trading settlement at Manila in the Philippines and this had become the focal point for a hugely lucrative trade between the Spanish Empire in the New World and the Far East. Once a year a consignment of silver from the mines of Central and South America was transported in one or two galleons from Acapulco on the coast of Mexico across the vast expanse of the Pacific to Manila. There the silver would be traded for silks from the Chinese ports of Macao and Canton, and for spices and other exotic goods from India and the Spice Islands. These would be loaded on to the galleons at Manila for the long voyage back to Acapulco. The galleons were known by the port of their departure, so the east-going galleon was called the Manila galleon and the same ship was called the Acapulco galleon on her west-going voyage.

Unlike the treasure fleets which crossed the Atlantic, the Acapulco and Manila galleons travelled alone and without an accompanying escort of warships. The Spanish had good reason to be confident in their ability to survive the journey unscathed. The ships themselves were among the largest merchant ships of their day, ranging from 500 to 1,000 tons. They were strongly built of teak, were usually armed with 50 to 80 guns and carried crews of up to 700 sailors and soldiers. Moreover, Spain jealously guarded her sovereignty over the Pacific, which, with some justification, had come to be known as 'the Spanish Lake'. Her warships patrolled the coasts of her empire in the New World and the crews of any foreign ships captured were subject to imprisonment, torture or death.

Before Woodes Rogers' expedition of 1708 only two treasure ships had ever been taken in the Pacific. On 1 March 1579 the British privateer Francis Drake, during the course of his circumnavigation of the world in the *Golden Hind*, had fought and taken the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, which was en route from Lima to Panama. She was not one of the Acapulco or Manila galleons but she carried a cargo which included 'a great quantity of jewels and precious stones, 13 chests of royals of plate, 80 lb of gold and 26 tons of uncoined silver'.⁸ A few years later two British ships under the command of Sir Thomas Cavendish encountered the Manila galleon *Santa Ana* as she approached the American coast off Cape San Lucas. After enduring six hours of gunfire from the British ships she surrendered. Cavendish returned to England in September 1588 and in November he sailed up the Thames in style. According to a Spanish agent in London, 'Every sailor had a gold chain round his neck, and the sails of the ship were a blue damask, the standard of cloth of gold and blue silk. It was as if Cleopatra had been resuscitated. The only thing wanting was that the rigging should have been of silken rope.'⁹

The voyages of Drake and Cavendish provided a tempting glimpse of the riches to be found in the Pacific, or what was then known as the Great South Sea, but it is the exploits of the buccaneers which are the real curtain-raiser for the story of Captain Woodes Rogers. The buccaneers' audacious attacks on Spanish treasure ports and coastal settlements in the New World revealed the

fragility of Spain's hold over her sprawling empire. And the adventures of one particular group of buccaneers are of direct relevance to Rogers' expedition. Known by their contemporaries as the South Sea Men, they cruised the same waters as Rogers, and they called in at the same islands to refit their ships and stock up on wood and water. Among the South Sea Men was William Dampier, whose published account of his voyages with the buccaneers brought him considerable fame when he eventually returned to London. As a result he was given command of a voyage of exploration to Australia, and later he led an expedition to capture the Manila galleon. Both voyages were abject failures but his reputation as a navigator, and the unrivalled experience which he had gained from travels that had taken him twice round the world, ensured that he was taken on as pilot by the sponsors of Rogers' expedition to the South Seas.

The term 'buccaneer' is generally used now to describe the privateers and pirates of the West Indies who raided Spanish towns and shipping in the Caribbean and along the coasts of Central and South America in the period from around 1600 to the 1680s.¹⁰ But the word originally applied to the groups of men, mainly French, who lived off the wild herds of cattle which roamed the northern regions of the great island of Hispaniola. They became known as *boucaniers* or *bucaniers* from their practice of roasting meat on a *boucan*, a type of barbecue, in the manner of the local Indians. Armed with an assortment of weapons and dressed in bloodstained hides, these rough men were described by a French missionary as 'the butcher's vilest servants who have been eight days in the slaughterhouse without washing themselves'.¹¹ Driven off Hispaniola by the Spanish in the 1630s, they migrated to the rocky island of Tortuga and used this as a base from which to attack passing ships and particularly those of the hated Spanish. After the capture of Jamaica by the British in 1655 many of the buccaneers moved to the harbour and town of Port Royal, which soon acquired the reputation of being the wickedest city in Christendom. The successive Governors of Jamaica encouraged the buccaneers to base themselves at Port Royal and issued privateering commissions for their ships. The buccaneers' presence protected the island from attack by the French or Spanish; and the ships and loot which they seized were of considerable benefit to the island's economy.

It was from Port Royal that Henry Morgan, the greatest of the buccaneers, set out on his devastating raids on the Spanish Main. Born in the county of Monmouth in Wales, he always regarded himself as a gentleman's son. Two of his uncles were distinguished soldiers (one was a major-general and another was a colonel who was briefly Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica). Morgan himself was a soldier in the expeditionary force which had captured Jamaica. He took part in a number of raids on Spanish towns in Central America and proved to be a brilliant leader of irregular forces. In 1668, in a bold attack at dawn on the fortified town of Portobello, he used the element of surprise to good effect and with only 500 men he took the castle, forced the garrison to surrender and negotiated a ransom. He returned to Jamaica with a haul of

gold and silver coins and bars of silver worth around 250,000 pesos. The following year he led a fleet of ships and attacked Maracaibo on the coast of Venezuela in the Gulf of Mexico, but his greatest feat was the sack of Panama City.

In August 1670 Morgan put out a call for men to join him in an attack on the Spanish Main. By September a multi-national fleet of thirty-eight ships and nearly 2,000 men had assembled at Isla Vaca on the south-west coast of Hispaniola. In December they sailed to San Lorenzo at the mouth of the River Chagres, captured the castle and commenced a gruelling march through the jungle to Panama. The army of mostly inexperienced soldiers and horsemen assembled on the plain outside the city were no match for Morgan's battle-hardened men, who swept them aside, and entered Panama. Within hours the great city was on fire and the buccaneers were looting the houses of any valuables they could find. The Spanish were outraged by the attack, which had taken place after a peace treaty had been signed between England and Spain.¹² Morgan, and Sir Thomas Modyford, the Governor of Jamaica, who had authorised him to carry out the raid, were both recalled to London. But just as Drake had been forgiven for his piracies against his country's traditional enemy and had received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth I, so Morgan received a knighthood from King Charles II and was sent back to Jamaica as Lieutenant Governor to defend the island from any future attack by French or Spanish warships. He rebuilt the coastal defences but proved to have little appetite for the administrative duties of his post. In August 1688 he died of drink and dropsy on his Jamaican estate, attended by Sir Hans Sloane, the celebrated physician whose library and collections would later form the basis of the British Museum.

Morgan was followed by the South Sea Men, who roamed all round the coast of South America and far out into the Pacific. Most of them were British but there were Dutchmen, Frenchmen, New Englanders and Creoles among them. Although they were regarded as bloodthirsty pirates by the Spanish whose ships they captured and whose towns they pillaged, it would be a mistake to dismiss them all as barbaric raiders. Their letters of marque were often of dubious validity, but they regarded themselves as privateers fighting an old enemy whose right to the riches of the New World they were prepared to challenge. As Protestants they had no hesitation in looting the Roman Catholic churches in South America of their gold and silver plate, and while they were merciless in shooting and slaughtering any who opposed their raids, they generally treated defeated enemies with respect and, unlike some of the earlier buccaneers and many of the later pirates, they rarely resorted to torture. While the Spanish had a dismal record of enslaving the native peoples and working them to death in the silver mines and on the plantations, the British buccaneers were invariably welcomed by the native Indians, who were prepared to supply them with food and shelter and to act as their guides in a hostile terrain.

We know this because there were several educated men among the

buccaneers who kept journals of their travels which were later published. Some of the journals reveal an intense curiosity about the little-known lands these buccaneers visited. They made maps and charts and included sailing directions for the benefit of mariners who might follow them, but they also recorded the appearance and customs of the native peoples, and recorded long, meticulous descriptions of the strange animals, birds, trees and plants they came across. The writings of William Dampier are deservedly the best known but he had several companions whose journals make fascinating reading, notably those of Lionel Wafer, a surgeon who spent three months living among the Cuna Indians of Central America, and Basil Ringrose, who fought alongside the buccaneers and frequently acted as their interpreter. William Dick, who also published his experiences, wrote that ‘we made use of one Mr Ringrose, who was with us in all this voyage, and being a good scholar, and full of ingenuity, had also good skill in languages. This gentleman kept an exact and very curious journal of all our voyage, from our first setting out to the very last day ...’¹³

In December 1679 these buccaneer writers were among a miscellaneous crew of adventurers, logwood cutters, naval deserters and soldiers of fortune who had gathered on seven ships off the west coast of Jamaica. Under the leadership of captains Coxon, Sawkins and Sharp they set sail towards the Isthmus of Panama (then called the Isthmus of Darien), their aim being ‘to pillage and plunder in those parts’. They looted Portobelo and then sailed south to Golden Island, where 300 of them landed and marched inland across the Isthmus. After nine days’ march they reached the Spanish town of El Real de Santa Maria, which was situated at the head of a great river estuary. Warned of their coming, the Governor had despatched all the gold and valuables to Panama. El Real de Santa Maria was defended by wooden palisades and by a garrison of 200 men but the buccaneers had no difficulty in overcoming them. Disappointed to find a settlement of primitive houses with scarcely anything worth looting, they set fire to the church and the fort and set off downstream. Their next target was Panama.

Raiding the South Seas

The buccaneers arrived off Panama shortly before sunrise. It was the morning of 23 April 1680, a day of good omen because it was dedicated to St George, the patron saint of England. The men had been rowing since four o'clock the previous afternoon and had kept going through the night, following the coastline but staying a few miles offshore to avoid detection. As the light increased they could see the church towers and tiled rooftops of the great city. To the east were the ruins of the old town, which had been burnt down following its capture by Sir Henry Morgan. The wooden buildings had gone but prominent among the remaining stone structures was the old cathedral, 'the beautiful building whereof maketh a fair show at a distance, like unto that of St Pauls at London'.¹

Of more immediate concern to the buccaneers were the ships lying at anchor nearby in the lee of the island of Perico. Among the smaller local craft they could see five large merchant ships and three Spanish warships. As soon as the leading canoes of the buccaneers were sighted, the warships weighed anchor and got under sail. The Spanish had been warned of their presence in the area and had orders to intercept them and to give no quarter to those they captured. The ships had the wind behind them and, steering directly for the canoes, seemed intent on running them down.

The buccaneers were exhausted after rowing more or less continuously for twelve hours and there were only sixty-eight of them, the rest having stayed behind at El Real de Santa Maria. Thirty-two of them were in a heavy piragua, a large dugout vessel made from the trunk of a cotton tree. The remaining thirty-six buccaneers were in five canoes commandeered from the local Indians. These were extremely unstable craft. Ringrose recorded, 'Here in the Gulf it went very hard with us whensoever any wave dashed against the sides of our canoe, for it was nigh twenty foot in length, and yet not quite one foot and a half in breadth, where it was at its broadest so that we had just room to sit down in her, and a little water would easily have both filled and overwhelmed us.'² His canoe had in fact capsized during their journey to Panama but somehow they had survived and managed to save their weapons.

While the buccaneers were aware that the odds were heavily against them, having come so far they were in no mood to surrender. As John Cox later recalled, 'we made a resolution rather than drown in the sea, or beg quarter of the Spaniard, whom we used to conquer, to run the extremest hazard of fire and sword'.³ The Spanish forces bearing down on them were overwhelming. They had a total of 228 men on their three ships and they were led by experienced commanders. The leading ship was commanded by

Don Diego de Carabaxal, who had a crew of sixty-five men. This was followed by the flagship, commanded by Don Jacinto de Barahona. He was 'High Admiral of those seas' and had a crew of eighty-six Biscay men, who were reckoned the best mariners and soldiers among the Spaniards. The third warship was commanded by Don Francisco de Peralta, 'an old and stout Spaniard, native of Andalucia'. His ship was manned by seventy-seven Negroes.

Although tired and outnumbered, the buccaneers were a formidable fighting force. They appear not to have been affected by the heat, the humidity and the swarms of mosquitoes and they evidently had extraordinary reserves of stamina. They had survived a gruelling march across the Isthmus of Panama during which they had had to cut their way through the jungle. They had crossed mountains and fast-flowing rivers and endured days of being drenched in tropical downpours. Most of them had a long history of raiding coastal settlements and they had recently captured two Spanish towns. They were armed with pistols and cutlasses but their most deadly weapons were their long-barrelled muskets.⁴ These apparently unwieldy guns were made in France and came to be known as *fusils bucaniers*. They were extremely accurate in the hands of experienced sharpshooters and had proved deadly during Morgan's attacks on Spanish treasure ports.

In addition to their proven marksmanship the buccaneers had the advantage of being able to manoeuvre their canoes in any direction – unlike the Spanish ships, which were dependent on the strength and direction of the wind. As the first of the warships bore down on them the buccaneers simply rowed past and got to windward. Four buccaneers were wounded by a broadside from the ship's guns as she passed but a volley from the buccaneers' muskets shot dead several men on her decks. The admiral's ship now drew abreast of the canoes and this time the buccaneers managed to shoot the helmsman. With no hand at the helm the ship rounded up into the wind and lay helpless with her sails aback. The buccaneers rowed up under her stern and shot every man who attempted to take the helm. They also shot through the ship's mainsheet and the braces (the ropes controlling the sails), an astonishing feat to achieve with muskets from a moving canoe.

The third ship, commanded by Don Peralta, now headed towards the flagship, intending to assist the admiral and his beleaguered crew. But before he could reach the admiral, Peralta's ship was intercepted by the heavy piragua with its thirty or more buccaneers led by Captain Sawkins, which came alongside, 'both giving and receiving death unto each other as fast as they could charge'.⁵ By this time the first ship had tacked and come about and was also intending to come to the aid of the admiral who was observed standing on his quarterdeck waving a handkerchief to attract the attention of his captains. To prevent the two ships joining forces the canoe of Ringrose and the canoe commanded by Captain Springer headed for the first ship and let loose a murderous fire which killed and wounded so many men that there were scarcely enough left to sail the ship. Don Carabaxal decided to take