The Buccaneers of America

Excerpt from *The Buccaneers of America*

*By Alexander O. Exquemelin*

*Originally published in 1684*

*Reprinted by Dover Publications, Inc., 1969*

“If anyone has a quarrel and kills his opponent treacherously, he is set against a tree and shot dead by the one whom he chooses. But if he has killed his opponent like an honourable man—that is, giving him time to load his musket, and not shooting him in the back—his comrades let him go free.”

Buccaneers were a group of seventeenth-century sea raiders who operated in the Caribbean Sea. Warm weather, numerous waterways and islands, and feuding conquerors allowed piracy, or the act of robbing at sea, to flourish. Many islands in the Caribbean had jagged coastlines, which gave pirates places to hide and led to notorious pirate lairs developing in the area. In some cases the pirates even took over islands. Tortuga, an island north of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), became the center of buccaneer activity in the 1600s. Encouraged by the governors of the area, who often shared in the profits, buccaneers attacked richly laden ships transporting the wealth of the Americas to Europe.

**How buccaneers became pirates**

The buccaneers were a group of hunters who had left the Caribbean settlements to live on their own as hunters. Many had been prisoners, runaway servants, or escaped slaves. Cattle and hogs ran wild on many of the Caribbean islands, so meat was plentiful. The native Caribs taught the
A buccaneer. MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/EVERETT COLLECTION.
hunters to cure meat over a fire to preserve it. The Caribs called the frame they used for this a *boucan*. The French adopted the word and created the verb *boucaner*, which meant to smoke meat using a *boucan*. They called those who made the dried meat strips *boucaniers*, which when translated into English became *buccaneers*.

The buccaneers lived in small groups of two to five men. Many of the buccaneers lived in homosexual unions called *matelotage*. Matelots, as the members of the union were called, took care of each other in sickness and battle. They shared all their property in common and did not marry or raise families.

The buccaneers traded the hides and jerky from the animals they hunted. To survive, they also engaged in occasional sea raids. Their main targets were Spanish ships. The Spanish colonial government on Hispanola did not like having these attackers living among them, so in the 1620s they began to take steps to drive the buccaneers out. First, the Spanish killed off the wild livestock that the buccaneers hunted, hoping that, with the source of their livelihood gone, the buccaneers would leave. Instead, the buccaneers turned more and more to piracy.

They built small, fast barques (vessels with one mast and triangular sails) of cedar that could easily sail into the wake (waves behind a boat) of the clumsy, larger merchant ships. Then they used grappling hooks to board the vessels, and with cutlasses and pistols took over the ships, overpowering the crews in hand-to-hand combat.

**Tortuga: the buccaneer’s base**

The buccaneers established a base on Tortuga. This island was an ideal location, because there was only one accessible port, which could be easily guarded against attack. The buccaneers began calling themselves the Brethren of the Coast in 1640. They lived under their own rules, and every buccaneer had a say in how the group was governed.

Around this time, European countries were fighting for control of the various Caribbean islands. The French West India Trading Company opened warehouses on Tortuga to do business with the buccaneers, and the island virtually became a French colony. But in 1654 the Spanish drove the French and English from the island and established a fort. The following year the English took over Jamaica. England sent colonist Elias Watts and a few families to Tortuga to start plantations. The Spanish governor gave up the island without a fight. Watts allowed buccaneers to live there in exchange for a portion of their loot.
In 1660 a Frenchman, Jérémie Deschamps (1615–1675), took over the island from Watts. The West India Company named Bertrand d’Ogeron governor of Tortuga in 1665. He encouraged the buccaneers to engage in bolder acts. To settle them in town, d’Ogeron had a shipful of women sent from Europe and auctioned them off. The buccaneers did not have to marry the women but had to live with them as partners rather than slaves. Under d’Ogeron’s leadership, the buccaneers were at their most numerous and most deadly.

The mysterious Exquemelin

Much of what is known about the buccaneers comes from a book by Alexander O. Exquemelin titled *The Buccaneers of America*, originally published in Dutch in 1678. However, very little is known for certain about the author himself. No one knows for sure who Exquemelin was or where he came from. The only facts about his life that have been recorded are from his early twenties on, when he departed from Havre-de-Grace, France, for the Caribbean. According to some sources, the author is A.O. Exquemelin, whose initials stand for Alexandre Olivier. But an English edition of the book lists the author as John Esquemeling, perhaps an English spelling of the last name. Even more curiously, the French version published in 1686 indicated that the author’s last name was Oexmelin and that he was French. That raises the questions of why he wrote the book in Dutch and how he learned Dutch so well while he was a buccaneer. The claim that he was French led historians to wonder if he might have been a Huguenot, a French Protestant group that was driven from France during the religious persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With the exception of the French translation, most prefaces to early editions of the book suggest that the author was either Flemish (from Flanders in the Netherlands) or Dutch.

Exquemelin was most likely born around 1645 and died after 1707. He sailed to Tortuga in 1666, and *The Buccaneers of America* details his adventures in the New World. After serving the French West India Company for three years, he became a buccaneer, most likely as a barber-surgeon. Exquemelin tells of life on the high seas under several pirates, including Henry Morgan (c. 1635–1688). In 1674 Exquemelin ended his career as a buccaneer and returned to Europe, where he settled in Amsterdam. There he qualified to be a surgeon in 1679. His name is on the register of the Dutch Surgeons’ Guild that year. Yet, he seems to have later returned to
Exquemelin’s tale

_The Buccaneers of America_ begins with Exquemelin sailing from France on May 2, 1666, on the _St. John_ in the service of the French West India Company. A group of ships departed together with a man-of-war for protection against pirates. (A man-of-war is a heavily armed warship.) Near Barbados an English privateer chased them, but the _St. John_ was faster and managed to elude it. (A privateer is a private ship or ship owner commissioned by a state or government to attack the merchant ships of an enemy nation.) Exquemelin’s ship survived a number of storms and arrived safely in Tortuga on July 7 with all the goods and passengers intact, which was not often the case. Exquemelin then described the beauty of the island.

Exquemelin had gained his passage on the ship by agreeing to become an indentured servant, working on a plantation for the West India Company. (An indentured servant is a person working under a contract that commits him or her to an employer for a fixed period of time, typically three to seven years.) Because the plantation lost money, the West India Company sold it along with the contracts of all the indentured servants. Exquemelin’s contract was bought by another master, who mistreated him. When Exquemelin became sick and seemed about to die, his owner sold him to a surgeon. Exquemelin recovered his health and stayed with the doctor for a year. The surgeon then offered Exquemelin his freedom on the condition that Exquemelin repay him when he had earned enough money. Exquemelin decided that the fastest way to earn the money would be to join the buccaneers.

Things to remember while reading the excerpt from _The Buccaneers of America_:

- This book was originally written in Dutch in 1678. A few years after it was published, translations came out in several different languages, but, following a lawsuit, the English publishers changed some of the material in the book. The selection used here is from the first English translation to be based on the original Dutch version.  
- _The Buccaneers of America_ is divided into three parts. The first part describes the French arrival in Hispaniola and describes the island...
of Tortuga. This passage comes from that first part of the book. The second part of the book describes the buccaneers, their way of life, and their attacks on the Spanish, especially under Henry Morgan. The third part details the burning of Panama City, which is why the book’s full title is *The Pirates of Panama; Or, The Buccaneers of America: A True Account of the Famous Adventures and Daring Deeds of Sir Henry Morgan and Other Notorious Free-booters of the Spanish Main.*
• Freebooters are sailors who plunder (rob of goods by force), similar to pirates but usually not as well organized or as violent.
• Spain controlled most of the territories in the area, including Mexico, Florida, Cuba, Hispaniola, and the coast of Venezuela, all of which was known as the Spanish Main. Buccaneers gained much of their wealth from looting Spanish galleons.

The Buccaneers of America

... The French on Hispaniola have three sorts of employment—hunting, planting and privateering. When a man has finished his service, he seeks out a partner and they pool all they possess. They draw up a document, in some cases saying that the partner who lives longer shall have everything, in others that the survivor is bound to give part to the dead man’s friends or to his wife, if he was married. Having made this arrangement, some go off marauding, others to hunt, and others to plant tobacco, as they think best.

There are two sorts of hunters: those who hunt bulls for the hides, and those who go after wild boar, to sell the meat to the planters. The hunters of bulls became known as boucaniers. Formerly there used to be a good five or six hundred of them on the island, but now they are less than three hundred strong; the cattle have become so scarce the hunters have to be very quick and skilful to catch any.

The men stay a whole year, sometimes even two years, without leaving the woods, and then cross over to Tortuga to fetch necessaries—powder and shot, muskets, linen and so forth. When they arrive, they squander in a month all the money which has taken them a year or eighteen months to earn. They drink brandy like water, and will buy a whole cask of wine, broach it, and drink until there’s not a drop left. Day and night they roam the town, keeping the feast of Bacchus so long as they can get drink for money. The service of Venus is not forgotten, either. In fact, the tavern-keepers and whores make ready for the coming of the hunters and the privateers in the same way as their fellows in Amsterdam prepare for the arrival of the East India ships and men-of-war. Once their money is all spent and they’ve had all they can on credit, back they go to the woods again, where they remain for another year or eighteen months.

Now we shall describe the sort of life they lead there. Having met at the rendezvous, they separate into troops of five or six hunters, with their indentured servants if they have any. Each band seeks a well situated place near the open fields, where they set up their tents and make a hut in which to store the hides when dry.

Squander: Spend wastefully.
Broach: Pierce a cask to open it.
Bacchus: Greek god of wine and revelry.
Venus: Roman goddess of love and pleasure.
Men-of-war: Armed ships.
Rendezvous: Arranged meeting place.
In the morning, as soon as it begins to get light, the hunters call up their hounds and go into the forest, along the trails where they hope to meet most bulls. Immediately [when] they have shot a beast, they take what they call their brandy—that is, they suck all the marrow from the bones before it is cold [as a tonic, or strengthener]. After this, they flay the beast properly, and one of them takes the hide to their rendezvous. They carry on like this until every man has got a hide; this takes until about noon—sometimes later, sometimes sooner. When they are all met together at the rendezvous, if they have bond-servants, these have to stretch out the hides to dry, and prepare the food. This is always meat, for they eat nothing else.

Having eaten, every man takes his gun and they go off to shoot [wild] horses for sport, or to bring down birds with a single bullet. Or they may shoot at targets for a prize—usually at an orange tree, to see who can shoot off the most oranges without damaging them, but only nicking the stem with a single bullet—which I’ve often seen done.

Sundays they spend carrying the hides down to the beach and putting them in the boats. There was once a bondsman who badly wanted to have a rest, and told his master God had ordained seven days in a week—six for labour and the seventh for rest. His master did not interpret matters this way. He thrashed the lad unmercifully with a stick, saying ‘Get on, you bugger; my commands are these—six days shalt thou collect hides, and the seventh shalt thou bring them to the beach.’ . . .

When the provisions are on board and the ship is ready to sail, the buccaneers resolve by common vote where they shall cruise. They also draw up an agreement or chasse partie, in which is specified what the captain shall have for himself and for the use of his vessel. Usually they agree on the following terms. Providing they capture a prize, first of all these amounts would be deducted from the whole capital. The hunter’s pay would generally be 200 pieces of eight. The carpenter, for his work in repairing and fitting out the ship, would be paid 100 or 150 pieces of eight. The surgeon would receive 200 or 250 for his medical supplies, according to the size of the ship.

Then came the agreed awards for the wounded, who might have lost a limb or suffered other injuries. They would be compensated as follows: for the loss of a right arm, 600 pieces of eight or six slaves; for a left arm, 500 pieces of eight or five slaves. The loss of a right leg also brought 500 pieces of eight or five slaves in compensation; a left leg, 400 or four slaves; an eye, 100 or one slave, and the same award was made for the loss of a finger. If a man lost the use of an arm, he would get as much as if it had been cut off, and a severe internal injury which meant the victim had to have a pipe inserted in his body would earn 500 pieces of eight or five slaves in recompense.

**Flay**: Strip off the hide.

**Bond-Servants**: Indentured servants.

**Pieces of eight**: Silver Spanish coins.

**Recompense**: Payment for something lost.
These amounts having first been withdrawn from the capital, the rest of the prize would be divided into as many portions as men on the ship. The captain draws four or five men’s portions for the use of his ship, perhaps even more, and two portions for himself. The rest of the men share uniformly, and the boys get half a man’s share.

When a ship has been captured, the men decide whether the captain should keep it or not: if the prize is better than their own vessel, they take it and set fire to the other. When a ship is robbed, nobody must plunder and keep his loot to himself. Everything taken—money, jewels, precious stones and goods—must be shared among them all, without any man enjoying a penny more than his fair share. To prevent deceit, before the booty is distributed, everyone has to swear an oath on the Bible that he has not kept for himself so much as the value of a **sixpence**, whether in silk, linen, wool, gold, silver, jewels, clothes or shot, from all the capture. And should any man be found to have made a false oath, he would be banished from the **rovers**, and never more be allowed in their company.

The buccaneers are extremely loyal and ready to help one another. If a man has nothing, the others let him have what he needs on credit until such time as he can pay them back. They also see justice done among themselves. If anyone has a quarrel and kills his opponent treacherously, he is set against a tree and shot dead by the one whom he chooses. But if he has killed his opponent like an honourable man—that is, giving him time to load his musket, and not shooting him in the back—his comrades let him go free. The duel is their way of settling disputes.

When they have captured a ship, the buccaneers set the prisoners on shore as soon as possible, apart from two or three whom they keep to do the cooking and other work they themselves do not care for, releasing these men after two or three years....

---

*What happened next...*

In his book Exquemelin discusses several well-known pirates of the time, including Pierre le Grand and Francis L’Olonnais (c. 1635–1668). And though the preface to his book indicates that Exquemelin was present at all the events he describes, many scholars have questioned whether this was true. Some believe that his descriptions of Pierre le Grand’s exploits differ enough from the facts that Exquemelin may have written down tales he heard about the pirate rather than ones he participated in. Others see Exquemelin as a reliable witness to the history of the buccaneers. Although some of the

---

**Sixpence**: English coin worth six pennies.

**Rovers**: Pirates.
exploits in his book may be exaggerated, most of the details of Exquemelin’s stories of serving under Captain Henry Morgan seem to ring true.

Four years after Exquemelin settled in Amsterdam, the publisher Jan ten Hoorn printed the Dutch version of Exquemelin’s book, *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers*, in 1678. The book was translated into German the following year and into Spanish in 1681. Then two English publishers picked it up in 1648. W. Crook released the first English edition and changed the title to *Buccaniers of America*. The other version was printed by Thomas Malthus and had the title *The History of Bucaniers*. These English
translations came out while some of the buccaneers mentioned in the book were still alive.

Henry Morgan was upset about how he had been portrayed so he sued both publishers for libel and won £200 plus damages from each. Morgan resented Exquemelin’s portrayal of him as cruel to prisoners. Exquemelin had also written that, when Morgan was a boy, his parents sold him to a plantation owner in Barbados. But following the lawsuit in 1685, the English publisher W. Crook printed the following retraction, as quoted by Walter Adolphe Roberts in *Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer and Governor*.

“John Esquemeling hath mistaken the Origin of Sir Henry Morgan, for he was a Gentleman’s Son of good Quality, in the County of Monmouth, and was never a Servant unto anybody in his life, unless unto his Majesty, the late King of England.” Since that time many different translations of the book have appeared, and the buccaneers of the Caribbean live on in the pages of Exquemelin’s book.

**Did you know . . .**

- In addition to their base on Tortuga, the buccaneers also had a base at Port Royal, Jamaica.
- During Colonial times, many European countries encouraged piracy in the Caribbean to weaken or destroy rival nations’ trade, which bettered their own financial state and allowed them to obtain more money for their goods.
- Former pirates and privateers sometimes ended up as governors or officials on various Caribbean islands. For example, Henry Morgan was appointed lieutenant governor of Jamaica.
- Many Caribbean pirates attacked the Spanish Main, an area that included the Spanish colonies in the Americas, especially Central America and the northern part of South America. The Spanish Main had abundant gold, silver, and precious gems. Most of these treasures were located inland and had to be transported to the coast by mule. Pirates often attacked these mule trains or raided the port cities of Portobelo and Darien in Panama and Cartagena in Venezuela.

**Consider the following . . .**

- Exquemelin describes Captain Henry Morgan in glowing terms. For example, Chapter 9 is titled “His [Morgan’s] exploits, and the
most remarkable actions of his life.” The author devotes ten of his eighteen chapters to Morgan’s deeds. Why would this be so when Morgan was such a notorious pirate?

• In what ways did colonial society contribute to the development of the buccaneers? How did putting former pirates and privateers in positions of authority affect the growth of piracy in the New World?

• What effects do you think buccaneers and pirates had on the original natives of the Caribbean and the American continents?

For More Information

BOOKS


PERIODICALS


WEB SITES