

Spanish Gold – Captain Woodes Rogers and The Pirates of the Caribbean  
by David Cordingly.  
Bloomsbury 2011.

The celluloid exploits of Captain Jack Sparrow have brought many to the enduring genre of swashbuckling sea-farers and glamorous rogues. The historical reality behind the movies might have been somewhat less glitzy but was in no way less dramatic.

In Spanish Gold, David Cordingly, Keeper of Pictures and Head of Exhibitions at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, tells in 15 exciting chapters the story of some of the most infamous pirates of all, including Blackbeard, Calico Jack, Bartholomew Roberts, John Rackam, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, and the officers of the Crown who hunted, caught and executed many of them. It is also the story of Woodes Rogers, himself a former privateer, who was appointed in the early 1700s as Governor of the island of Providence in the West Indies with a view to dealing with the pirates then ensconced in Nassau.

At this time many huge Spanish galleons, laden with the gold of South America, together with ships carrying slaves and other cargo plied their trade across the Atlantic, making rich pickings for ship-born raiders. While the Crown was in no way averse to helping itself on occasions, the depredations of the pirates and the anarchy and chaos that surrounded them posed a challenge to authority and the rule of law which had to be met.

Wodes Rogers' career was mixed; he had some successes but many disappointments and felt himself abandoned and disregarded by the authorities in England. His highpoints were perhaps his rescue of Alexander Selkirk from the island on which he had been abandoned ( Selkirk was to be the model on whom Daniel Defoe based Robinson Crusoe), his restoration of law and order in the Bahamas and his capture of the Manila treasure galleon.

Cordingly's enthusiasm for his subject is apparent on every page and the book is an engaging, pacy and fresh retelling of a fascinating period of British naval history.

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