

Pirates

Our stateless heroes

Sean Cleary

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a review of

Under the Banner of King Death: Pirates of the Atlantic by David Lester and Marcus Rediker; Illustrated by David Lester; Edited by Paul Buhle. Beacon Press 2023

When you encounter the English-speaking world's fascination with the golden age of Atlantic pirating, it's better understood to think of it less about the act of pirating itself, and more about the relationship of pirates to the state. As Marcus Rediker's 2004 book's title indicated, they were the Villains of All Nations, separate from state sanctioned pirating like privateering, seemingly dead to the people of other nations.

What their statelessness looked like in the public's eye varied widely, from the comedic in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* and Disney's *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, to the projectionist fantasies of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and even, classically, Defoe's pirate encounter in *Robinson Crusoe* as a rejection of truth and trust—a sort of elemental betrayal of the agreements that underpinned Crusoe's sense of civilization.

This place of the pirate in the popular imagination, especially here in the U.S., is important to keep in mind when approaching a graphic novel like David Lester, Marcus Rediker and Paul Buhle's new *Under the Banner of King Death: Pirates of the Atlantic*. Alongside Lester's masterful illustration, Rediker's lifelong project of historical storytelling "from below" brings readers into a graphic novel that tackles not only our fascination with pirates, but also their place in anarchist history, offering a glimpse into how societies work without states, and many times without non-consensual hierarchies inherent in the formation of the modern state.

This book marks the second collaboration of Lester, Rediker and Buhle. Those who read their previous graphic novel about the abolitionist Benjamin Layn Prophet Against Slavery, will recognize not only the heavy strokes and bold paneling of Lester's artwork, but similarly bold-lined storytelling by Rediker and Buhle, who tend to move the reader towards moments of profound action.

These profound actions become immediately clear in the first scene of the novel where a man accused of piracy, John Brown, is led to the gallows in 1720 Boston. Brown laughs at the "bigwigs" as he unrepentantly ascends the gallows, and the colonial elite, including the famous minister Cotton Mather, sneer back at him. Watching him all the while are the common people of the colony along with the polyglot throng of seamen tied to the colonial port. It's a scene profoundly connected to the Atlantic world.

It's interesting story telling, because *King Death* is and is not about this John Brown, who in those first pages dies in horrible fashion; swinging by a rope, split between panels of the novel. He splits time—both breaking the plain of the graphic novel, and marking both an end-point and a beginning.

What Lester seems to be getting across in this first scene is what Rediker and Buhle hope to tell in the compelling story that spans the rest of the novel: the rejection of the state is not a singular project, but one that spiders across time like a lightning bolt. Every moment of defiance, every moment of cooperation, of humanity, offers a new road for the larger human hope of a different world.

Brown's words on the gallows, his ability, as one character anachronistically says, to "speak truth to power," act as the kernel that drives our two main characters, a black man named John and a white Dutch sailor, Ruben. They witness and participate in mutiny, the construction of a pirate order, and their eventual interactions with all the different elements of the Atlantic world in the 18th Century, from the colonial violence visited on the first peoples, to the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, and the violence of impressment. Rediker's use of this phrase from the 20th Century offers the reader a sense of their liberation struggle's universality as his characters make their historical journey.

King Death enters the conversation started some time ago about the role of piracy in the Atlantic world begun in some ways by Rediker himself, but also by historians like Gerald Horne in his *The Dawning of the Apocalypse* with its clear vision of how the 18th century Atlantic world was forged in violence.

While often pirates in this age in contemporary accounts were seen to be the pinnacle of that violence—as was seen in *Crusoe*—Rediker, Buhle, and Lester create a narrative of this era that tells quite a different story. Violence is not the breakdown of state control, but instead its primary tool. To be, then, the "villains of all nations" is not to be the shedding of humanity, but in fact perhaps its only hope.

Rediker, Buhle, and Lester's graphic novel offers something of hope, even with its plot arc ending in a sort of tragedy. The novel begins with a hanging, and we see how that injustice, and the defiance of its victims, can inspire something more in its characters. At the end, it seems, we are asked to be the next witnesses.

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