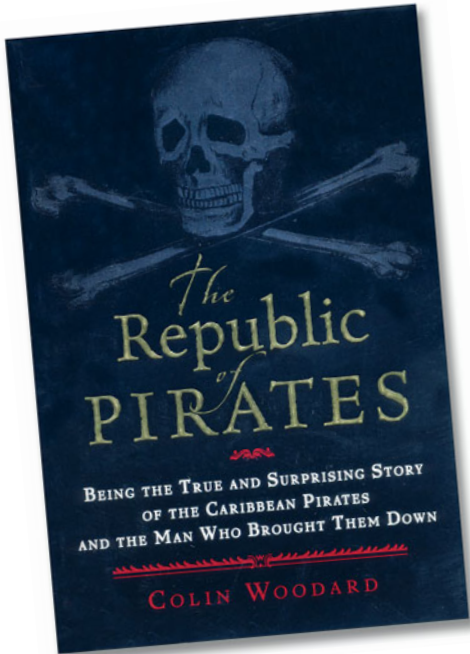


The *Real* Pirates of the Caribbean



The Republic of Pirates: Being the True and Surprising Story of the Caribbean Pirates and the Man Who Brought Them Down

By Colin Woodard
Harcourt (2007); 383 pages;
hard cover, \$27.

YOU MAY SHARE TRAITS with pirates of yore. Apparently I do. There's our affinity for the water, of course, secluded Caribbean coves and a tendency to lust after faster, better-equipped vessels than our own. Impatience with unearned authority is another, as is an aversion to shady politicians and anyone who attempts to curtail our independence. Perhaps comparisons end there, but as *The Republic of Pirates*, by Colin Woodard, reveals, eighteenth-century pirates created their own kind of democracy in an effort to better their lives.

Woodard, a Portland-based journalist, is the author of *The Lobster Coast* and *Ocean's End*. This time he gives us a meticulously researched history of the

Golden Age of Piracy, from 1715 to 1725, when events contrived to turn merchants and mariners, deserters, gentlemen, runaway slaves, and a few cross-dressing women, into rebels of the sea. Written primarily from the Caribbean pirates' point of view, it puts their motivations into perspective. They were fed up with their oppressors—brutal captains and ship owners, navy commanders and owners of slave plantations. From their “pirate paradise” in Nassau, Bahamas, the pirates commanded what Woodward describes as “a zone of freedom in the midst of an authoritarian age.” Their maritime revolt shook the British Empire, brought transatlantic commerce to a halt, and fueled “democratic sentiments that would lead into the American revolution.”

Primarily English and Irish, but Scottish, French, Swedish, and Native American as well, the Caribbean pirates formed a common culture, frequently casting aside traditional enemies to come to each others' aid. Two or three dozen pirate commodores knew each other well, having served together in the past, on merchant or pirate vessels.

Captains were voted in by their crew and ruled with an iron hand. They were voted out when the electorate lost confidence in their command. Plunder was shared equally and important decisions were determined in open council. African slaves were treated as cargo but, when captured, sometimes became pirates who were treated as equals. Only in the republic of pirates did ordinary sailors have rights.

“Unlike their pirate predecessors, they were engaged in more than simple crime and undertook nothing less than a social and political revolt,” writes Woodard. In their own era, they became folk heroes whose sympathizers included traders and Bahamian governors who secretly caroused with the rebels and supplied them with guns, ammunition, and provisions.

According to Woodard, British

authorities estimated the worldwide pirate population at about 2,000 during its peak (1716 to 1718). Chief among their opponents was an English merchant fleet owner, Woodes Rogers, a British loyalist appointed governor of the Bahamas by King George. Rogers staked his name on the capture of a fellow native of Bristol, Edward “Blackbeard” Thatch, who, at one point commanded 700 pirates. Despite Rogers's victories against many other pirates, news of his success failed to reach London fast enough. He was removed from office and returned to England, where he was an outcast and destitute until a tremendously popular book of the time turned him into a national hero. That book, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (still in print), by an anonymous author, captivated the English-speaking world. Its insights and stories provided rich material for Woodard.

By 1725, only about 200 pirates remained active although piracy has never been eliminated, as mariners well know. [In 2000, more than 450 incidents against shipping world-wide were reported to the International Maritime Organization, dropping to just under 250 incidents reported in 2006.]

“Calico Jack” Rackham and his cross-dressing lover, Anne Bonny; Benjamin Hornigold, who founded the “pirate republic;” Stede Bonnet, a gentleman turned pirate; and many others actually hoisted the “jolly roger,” the familiar black flag with white death mask. With varying degrees of accuracy, they and their exploits live on in fiction and film as Captain Hook, Long John Silver, and Jack Sparrow.

Real pirate Edward “Black Sam” Belamy, like many, fell into piracy out of desperation. When the War of the Spanish Succession ended in 1713, thousands of sailors suddenly were unemployed; the Royal Navy was bankrupt; and merchant captains cut wages in half as every port overflowed with men hungry for

work. In 1714, Bellamy was a penniless sailor with family connections on Cape Cod where he became a business partner with Paulsgrave Williams, a wealthy, well-connected silversmith. They were a devious and successful team. They left New England for the Caribbean, where Bellamy swiftly rose to leadership. Within a year, he was commodore of 170 pirates and captain of *Whydah*, an 18-gun merchant ship that he and his crew had captured in Jamaica.

For two years, *Whydah's* crew wreaked havoc in the Leeward Islands, then gradually worked their way north. Following a lucrative spring pirating season in the East Coast shipping lanes, Bellamy planned to end up in Maine, where uninhabited coastline, countless anchorages hidden from the Europeans, and a shoreline covered in pine forest would have made an ideal pirate's retreat. But on April 26, 1717, *Whydah* was wrecked in a northeaster off Wellfleet Beach, Cape Cod, with 140 pirates aboard.

Woodard describes the event:

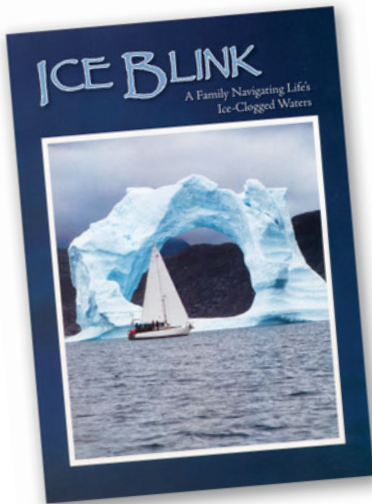
"The *Whydah* ran aground with shocking force. The jolt likely shot any men in the rigging out into the deadly surf, where they were alternately pounded against the sea bottom, then sucked back away from the beach by the undertow. Cannon broke free from their tackles and careened across the lower decks, crushing everyone in their path. One pirate was thrown across the deck so hard his shoulder bone became completely embedded in the handle of a pewter teapot. Little John King, the nine-year-old pirate volunteer, was crushed between decks, still wearing the silk stockings and expensive leather shoes his mother had dressed him in aboard the *Bonetta* months earlier. Within fifteen minutes, the violent motion of the surf brought the *Whydah's* mainmast crashing down over the side. Waves broke over the decks and water poured into the bedlam of crashing cannon and barrels of cargo below decks. At dawn the *Whydah's* hull broke apart, casting both the living and the dead into the surf."

Bellamy was the first of the legendary pirates to die; *Whydah* still lies where it was wrecked, and is considered to be the only verified pirate shipwreck. Survivors told authorities a brief stop on Cape Cod to resupply the ship had been planned. But, reports Woodard, local legend claims Bellamy's real goal was to reunite with the love he'd left behind and impress her family with his career success.

Whether or not Bellamy's judgment was clouded as storm conditions brewed, his actions differed little from those of his fellow pirates of the Caribbean. Bloodthirsty or benevolent, we learn that they were driven by dreams and human frailty as they tried to better their lives. When British authorities finally regained control of Bahamian waters, only a few hundred pirates remained. Their Golden Age ended: some returned to traditional seafaring, others shifted their piracy elsewhere, and a few retired in comfort. ✨

—Janet Mendelsohn

Navigating Life's Ice-Clogged Waters



Ice Blink: A Family Navigating Life's Ice-Clogged Waters

Length: 56 minutes.

SeaWorthy Productions, 2006.

\$17.95 (+\$5 shipping and handling) Order from: www.iceblinksail.com

DAVE AND JAJA MARTIN are known throughout the sailing community for their seven-year circumnavigation of the globe on their 25' daysailer *Direction*, with two young children born en route. Their book *Into the Light* chronicled the cruise. Their extraordinary lifestyle has become the envy of many, the nightmare of others, and the subject of this recent DVD documentary, *Ice Blink*, which continues their story beyond the circumnavigation. In a blend of travelog, interviews, and family video album, the Martins answer questions about their years of cruising to arctic Norway, Greenland, and Iceland aboard the 33' steel sloop *Driver*, with a family that had grown to five.

For boaters and landlubbers alike, the fascinating thing about the Martins is how they turned convention upside down. While many a sailor has ditched the 9-to-5 grind, found a house sitter, and headed for the tropics, few do so for years at a stretch just at that point when most worry about future college tuition bills and saving for retirement. Fewer still venture forth with school-age children, without income for the duration and without a home port. But Dave and Jaja Martin asked themselves, "What would happen if we chose differently?"

Two Americans who don't shy from adventure—they are members of the *Cruising World* Hall of Fame—the Martins outgrew *Direction* with the birth of their third child, Teiga, which led to an attempt at life ashore in Round Pond, Maine. In interviews, they touch on the tough choices they faced. Tension centers around what's best for your family, they tell us, and it was time to take a side road. Their children were growing up without others their own age, grandparents, or cousins; without team sports, such as Little League; without experiencing American public schools. Before the children's college years arrived, it was time to let them experience life in the United States.

So the Martins built and designed an environmentally focused house in Round Pond by hand, reflecting Dave and Jaja's belief in self-sustainability. Interviews with son Chris and daughter Holly are honest admissions by teenagers of how hard life can be when you live on a boat—no privacy, no space for friends to sleep over—and your parents won't own a TV. Home-schooled by their mom until Chris had reached second grade, the elder children had then attended school in Norway. They had become computer-savvy beyond their parents' abilities, world travelers, and bilingual, but Norwegian is of little use in Maine, said Chris. New friends asked what it was like to live in such a confined space, and the Martin teens wondered what land-based people did with such large homes.

The plan, however, was never to stay ashore long. Instead, Dave and Jaja built the house as a place in which to plant roots for their children and to retire to when their sailing days are behind them. Unfettered by others' expectations, they reversed the normal cycle.

"Ice blink" is a folk term for the phenomenon of white light seen on the horizon, the reflection of ice on low clouds, long used by sailors to navigate through Arctic waters laced with glaciers and ice floes. The DVD intersperses a Q & A session with Dave's stunning photography of the majestic scenery through which they traveled: splendid fjords, wondrous landscapes of spacious quiet, and wildlife. Naturally glorious beauty shots of *Driver* as the wind fills the sails are interspersed with a few too many views of the children flying from the rigging in bosun's chairs. But the title is most apt when their parents tell stories and share their philosophy about making life choices.

In a series of "chapters," Dave and Jaja talk about putting adventure first, retirement later, when they will be beyond their sailing years. They explain that because the two of them embarked on life afloat right out of school, before accumulating material goods and having steady jobs, or having children, they had nothing to give up. Dave says that to support the family he learned how to sell his photographs and their earlier book, and supplemented that with odd jobs, working on boats, cleaning bathrooms during extended periods in Norway and elsewhere. He explains why he bought and overhauled a steel-hulled sloop, sturdily built to withstand icebergs and polar bears.

Most of all, the Martins talk about the rewards of the lifestyle they chose: strong family bonds, in-depth appreciation for other cultures, self-confidence gained from overcoming adversity, a global perspective that their children will carry no matter what path they travel or what difficulties life puts in their way. Spontaneity, say the Martins, is always the path they choose. —Janet Mendelsohn ✨