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# A Pirate, A Cowboy, and A Bank Robber Walk into a Bar ... And Undergo a Study in Historical Romanticization

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A Pirate, A Cowboy, and A Bank Robber Walk into a Bar...  
And Undergo a Study in Historical Romanticization

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History Department Honors Project

April 25, 2018



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## Introduction

Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers may not seem to have a whole lot in common. There isn't a strong temporal or geographic connection, and whatever two of them have in common, they seem to leave the third out. In truth, the real connection between these three is my own childhood.

When I was very young, I made my parents play the movie *Muppet Treasure Island* for me almost on repeat. The songs, the adventure, and Tim Curry as Long John Silver all enchanted me. I'd sing the songs for days after each time I watched the movie. I did not regularly watch *The Muppet Show* growing up, and I watched the other Muppets movies sparingly, but I couldn't get enough of the classic pirate tale populated by puppets, jokes, and silliness. By the time I actually read Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, I still imagined Tim Curry as Long John. My parents knew my obsession pretty well. I received a number of pirate toy sets as presents when I was young. There were plastic cutlasses and eye patches and plastic doubloons. I had a pirate flag hanging in my room and I loved my parents' set of glasses that each bore a different pirate flag design. The release of *Pirates of the Caribbean* in 2003 and the numerous sequels all fed this love, and I went as a skeletal pirate one Halloween. My dad would remind me every September 19<sup>th</sup> about Talk Like a Pirate day. For a kid who grew up far from any ocean, I had a peculiar love of seafaring, especially those rascally pirates.

Cowboys, on the other hand, make a little more sense for a kid from Montana to love. My dad would regale my brothers and me with stories from before we were born of cowboys and mules. My dad had a horse for a period of time, and he had a mule too, one

particularly ornery and unfriendly except to him. He had met a number of cowboys in his lifetime, including one old black cowboy completely bald with arthritic feet who refused to wear anything but cowboy boots so he would get boots three or four sizes too big and fill the toes with foam. I would visit the Montana Historical Society with my parents and see Charley Russell paintings, and when I visited my mom at work at the Montana Capitol, I'd get to see the massive Russell painting in the House of Representatives. I spent so many afternoons watching Westerns with my dad, and he has a lifelong love for the genre. He even worked in Hollywood as a leatherworker and gunsmith and would point out his handiwork. We would watch his favorite John Ford films, *The Magnificent Seven*, and Howard Hawks Westerns, which became some of my favorites. My dad had plenty of facts and tidbits and insights about the genre. Importantly, he would always point out the depiction of Native Americans. As a professor of Native American studies, he had plenty to say about the multitude of inaccuracies and distortions. He filled in the gaps with his stories of Native American cowboys he had known. To this day I tell my dad whenever I watch a new Western to hear his thoughts and opinions.

Bank robbers in particular came to me later. I remember playing cops and robbers with my brother and my friends growing up, and our criminals often had a sort of sympathetic slant. I saw the film *O Brother, Where art Thou?* as a kid and, while I found the "Baby Face" Nelson character entertaining, I was not a fan of his penchant for livestock killing. But when I was a teenager, the movie *Public Enemies* starring Johnny Depp and Christian Bale came out. I loved both actors so, as a thirteen year old wanting to see an R-rated film, I made my mom take me. Depp as John Dillinger grabbed me, and I had to know more about him. Hollywood definitely caught me, but the more I looked up

about him, my interest only grew. Later, when I started listening to Woody Guthrie, my interest in “Pretty Boy” Floyd grew, and I was hooked on bank robbers. Maybe they appealed to my love of Robin Hood as a kid, but these larger than life criminals were irresistible.

So yes, this project is in a way indulging my childhood tastes and working them into a historical study. I clung to these figures and what I took them to represent. Even the less savory characters became a strange sort of hero to me. But importantly, I’m not the only one who has been so enchanted by these figures. Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers have all attained a powerful, symbolic status particularly in American culture. In one way or another, I was introduced to these figures through movies and stories and cultural depictions, and there’s an important reason there. Each of these figures are popular subjects appearing often in films and books. Just as my view of these figures was shaped by these depictions, so are uncountable others. These depictions form an image of these figures, and these depictions have a contentious relationship with historical fact. Depictions will not let the truth get in the way of a good story, and these good stories stick with people. Sometimes this is simple distortion for narrative purposes, but oftentimes this romanticization has deeper motivations, often ideological. This romanticization creates a sort of symbolic version of these figures. Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers each have undergone this romanticization into symbolic figures that can be used however one sees fit.

Now, these figures are not the only ones to receive this romanticizing treatment, but each of these figures provide a unique form of romanticization. Taken as a whole, comparing and contrasting the treatments they each receive indicates a lot about the



nature of romanticization of historical figures. Despite the wide gulfs between pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers, parallels can be found amongst all three groups. Pirates and bank robbers provide the most obvious parallel. Both groups are outlaws and criminals operating outside the bounds of the law. These figures become infamous and notorious for their crimes, always daring and often violent. Both groups practiced theft, kidnapping, and murder. The names of famous pirates and bank robbers attained near mythic qualities. The number of legends and tall tales about these figures make it especially difficult to discover what actually happened. Furthermore, any pirate or bank robber story has a fleeting quality. Everyone knows that eventually the authorities will catch up with these criminals, but that makes up an essential part of their allure. They cannot last forever. They are doomed, but they will make the most of the time they have. A certain freedom lies in knowing that the ending is already set.

Bank robbers and cowboys share intriguing qualities as well. Opposed to the less culturally specific nature of pirates, bank robbers and cowboys enjoy a peculiarly American quality. Despite a more multicultural root that is not always acknowledged, cowboys hold a particularly special place in the American imagination. Only through the subjugation of the Western US could cowboys arise, with large herds of livestock crossing vast swathes of land in a period during Native American dispossession but before widespread Euroamerican settling. The bank robbers that exploded onto the American landscape in the early years of the Great Depression could achieve success using the unique geographical qualities of the US. The Midwest, where most of the robbers operated, had many banks in small towns but there was plenty of countryside and highway to escape into if one had a fast car, and in the beginning, crossing state lines in

those fast cars allowed one to escape law enforcement before the advent of the FBI as a nationwide police force. Each of these situations arose in the US and while parallels and similar figures can indeed be found elsewhere, these figures retain that connection to the unique American geography, especially with an idea of escape. Cowboys manage to escape the settlement of the Eastern US for the still unregulated West, and bank robbers also attain a form of freedom, rebelling against the modern institutions in a sort of last gasp of individual freedom that hearkens back to the famous outlaws of the 19<sup>th</sup> century West like Jesse James and Billy the Kid.

However, cowboys and pirates do not share many overt connections, though they have both attained a sort of archetypal quality. Anyone can conjure up a mental picture of a cowboy and a pirate, and it is bound to share a number of qualities. On a less obvious level, both groups have a connection to labor. At their core, cowboys are migrant labor, without a set home traveling wherever the job and pay takes them. While one would have difficulty calling pirates a migrant labor force, before turning to piracy many worked as seamen aboard whichever ship needed a crew. As will be discussed later, many pirates originally served on naval and merchant vessels that filled the Atlantic and the Caribbean as the nations of Europe spread their overseas empires. At times when the governments did not need as many seamen, few other options were available, including piracy. While it may not be the strongest connection, both pirates and cowboys do have a connection to itinerant labor. Labor of this kind serves as a sort of double edged sword. One has the freedom to travel and pursue a job where one kind find it, but at the same time, one can easily be left with no direction and few options, leading to more dire choices.

Ultimately, a sense of freedom binds these figures together. With each group, part of their allure comes from a sort of self reliance, a lack of oversight, an escape from the expectations of their respective times. And each group operates within specific, fleeting times. The pirates most known today exploded on the scene at the beginnings of European imperialism, and ultimately could not continue under more intense attention that widespread empire brought. Cowboys could only drive cattle and wrangle wild horses while there remained no fences, no cities, no modern force of nationwide industrialization. Their lifestyle lives on in ranching, but the demands of ranching could never compare to the freedom of riding the range. The bank robbers arose with a time of great want and distrust of authority, especially that of banks, and furthermore, this time of crisis came at a turning point. The US was on the brink of becoming the world's predominant industrial and political power, but much of the country still lived a predominantly agricultural lifestyle with urbanization and modernization not yet taking complete hold on the nation. The bank robbers are a sort of last gasp of a freer, simpler time. With times of great change, traditional ideas of good and evil, just and unjust turn topsy-turvy, and groups that would not seem to make conventional heroes or idols can become far bigger than any would expect.

By taking these three groups with particular similarities, and comparing and contrasting the varying ways in which they are seized upon in popular culture and later depicted and remembered, we find the motivations and reasoning behind their respective romanticization. Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers are each celebrated in different ways as symbols of freedom, but this focus on freedom in depictions can distort and hide other qualities that can problematize or disrupt their romantic portrayals. By looking through

lenses such as race, gender, class, and violence, we discover a nuanced historical idea of these figures. Comparing the historical pirate, cowboy, or bank robber to the romanticized pirate, cowboy, or bank robber found in films, songs, novels, and other forms of popular culture provides three case studies in historical romanticization. This comparison will be used to determine the motives behind the romanticization, and what qualities are most often left out, especially amongst all three. By determining the silences and distortions one can attain a more nuanced understanding of these historical figures, and perhaps shine a light on if these figures should be so attractive to a young child.

## **“Festival of Conviviality” or “Hostis Humanis Generis”: The Problem of Piratical Progressivism**

Pirates, sea dogs, buccaneers, sea rovers, corsairs, freebooters. All common names for the scourge of the seas who steal and raid any who cross their path. To some, pirates serve as a symbol of lawlessness, violence, brutality, and evil, undermining civilization, sabotaging, and stealing what others have worked so hard to produce. To others, pirates play a different role. Rather than bloodthirsty thieves, pirates represent common people, rising up to seize upon their rightful due. They represent an anti-imperial, almost counter-culture force that empowers the powerless and stands up to an unfair system. While piracy has existed as long as humans have sailed, this glorified image of piracy arises most often concerning the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the “Golden Age of Piracy.”

Both of these depictions of piratical activity appear frequently in popular culture. Pirates pepper all sorts of adventure stories and novels, especially since the “Golden Age.” Piracy also remains a popular subject for films, continually returning despite some famous financial disasters. Works such as *Treasure Island* and its multiple film adaptations, the book and film *Captain Blood*, and the more modern *Pirates of the Caribbean* films have created an image of pirates that persists in the cultural imagination. While all vary in their glorification or denunciation of piracy, all partake in the romanticization of piratical groups. Many of these works often portray the pirates sympathetically, if not outright heroically. The pirates often serve as the protagonists in

these works, and even when they serve as the villains, there is almost always a temptation to agree and join with them.

This tendency appears within the scholarly field as well. While many historians of empire discuss pirates in terms of the destruction caused and measures taken to dismantle pirate activity, other historians choose to approach pirates from a different angle.

Historians such as Marcus Rediker approach piracy in order to highlight the positive aspects of the phenomenon. Some of the same qualities celebrated in popular works such as the egalitarian brotherhood or counter-culture tendencies lead some historians to discuss pirates as class activists and even an anti-imperial proletariat. In some ways, it would appear that the romanticized image of pirates has infiltrated the academic field.

Beyond the historical record, pirates have firmly fixed a place in the cultural imagination as symbols of a certain type of freedom. Be it freedom to steal and murder or freedom to escape the bonds and duties of an unfair system, pirates undoubtedly live on their own terms. While the symbol of piracy may be based in fact, the truth as always is far hazier and more complex. Historically pirates did enjoy a unique sort of freedom, and many who became pirates achieved greater freedom than what would have been possible as law-abiding subjects. However, this freedom had its basis in violence and deprivation of the freedom of others. No matter how egalitarian or progressive a pirate crew may have been, that society was based on a refusal of that nature to the majority of outsiders.

Many look to history to find heroes and villains, paragons of virtue and symbols of evil. Pirates can serve as both, but this practice always distorts the history and creates problematic narratives that hamper cultural understanding. Piracy has too long and varied and diverse a history to fit into one monolithic category. By closely examining the

narratives and portrayals that establish the symbol of the positive democratic pirate and comparing with the historical record with its often contradictory nature, a nuanced, more accurate image of piracy can be found, and examined as one example of contentious historical actors and why they are so contentious.

### **The Romantic Symbol**

One of the most influential sources for popular imaginings of pirates is Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, first published in 1882. As opposed to many of the stories that follow, the pirates are firmly the antagonists. When Billy Bones, a former pirate, gives young Jim Hawkins a treasure map on his death bed, Jim begins a wild adventure that finds him caught up with a pirate crew that seize control of a legitimate vessel in order to reclaim the treasure their old captain refused them. Long John Silver, the famed one-legged pirate, is the leader of the cutthroats, but he has a soft spot for Jim and protects him from the more wicked pirates. The story ends with Silver escaping from the law and Jim rich with pirate gold. Silver is by far the most sympathetic pirate, but few of the classic idealized pirate qualities are found in the novel. Rather, the novel provides many of the trappings of pirate depictions that have become cliché. The phrase "shiver me timbers" is scattered throughout the work, the pirates use the term "gentlemen of fortune" to refer to each other, and Long John Silver has a pet parrot that says, "Pieces of Eight!"<sup>1</sup> Indeed *Treasure Island* has played a huge role in determining how pirates are imagined, despite their unheroic depiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Originally Published London: Cassell and Company, 1883), 126, 157, 159 (iBook).

<sup>2</sup> *Captain Blood*, directed by Michael Curtiz, 1935.

On the other hand, *Captain Blood*, a film from 1935 based on the 1922 novel by Raphael Sabatini, is an early example of a film that favorably depicts pirates. The film tells the story of Peter Blood, played by Errol Flynn in his first of many swashbuckling performances, an Irish doctor residing in Britain sold into slavery for helping rebels against King James II. He and other rebels escape a plantation in Jamaica to commandeer a pirate ship, and become a notorious pirate crew themselves with Captain Blood becoming the hated target of his former slavemaster and eventual governor of Jamaica Colonel Bishop, despite Bishop's niece Arabella's growing love for Captain Blood. In the climax of the film, after rescuing Arabella from a devious French pirate and being told of his pardon and offer of royal approval by the new king William III, Captain Blood defeats a Spanish attack on Port Royal and becomes the new governor of Jamaica. One of the pivotal moments for Captain Blood and his crew is the writing of a charter to lay down a code for their crew. The charter reads,

We, the undersigned are men without a country, outlaws in our own land, and homeless outcasts in any other. Desperate men, we go to seek a desperate fortune. Therefore, we do here and now band ourselves into a brotherhood of buccaneers to practice the trade of piracy on the high seas. We, the hunted, will now hunt! To that end, we enter into the following articles of agreement. First, we pledge ourselves to be bound together as brothers in a life-and-death friendship sharing alike in fortune and in trouble. Second article: All moneys and valuables which may come into our possession shall be lumped together into a common fund and from this fund shall first be taken the money to fit, rig, and provision the ship. After that, the recompense each will receive who is wounded as follows: For the loss of a right arm, 600 pieces of eight. Left arm, 500. For the loss of a right leg, 500. Left leg, 400. If a man conceal any treasure captured or fail to place it in the general fund, he shall be marooned. Set ashore on a deserted isle and there left with a bottle of water, a loaf of bread and a pistol with one load. If a man shall be drunk on duty, he shall receive the same fate. And if a man shall molest a woman captive against her will he, too, shall receive the same punishment. These articles entered into, this 20th day of June, in the year 1687.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Captain Blood*, directed by Michael Curtiz, 1935.



These articles reveal much about the nature of Captain Blood's crew. Their piracy is contingent upon their exile and condemnation at home, and their only comrades and friends are those who have joined together as pirates. Out of this desperation comes a progressive, egalitarian coalition. Captain Blood even ensures that those outside of his crew of shipmates gain some protection by threatening his crew with death should they harm a woman.

Naturally this agreement allows Captain Blood and his crew to flourish as they gain fame and fortune beyond their wildest dreams. Additionally, it is this charter that Captain Blood uses to justify his dispatching of his former French partner, Levasseur, for taking Arabella Bishop, his love interest, captive. Captain Blood and his crew serve as an excellent example of the pirate crew that, despite their criminal activities, reveal themselves as good men at heart. The film does seem to endorse this brand of piracy as an honorable profession, though the film does qualify this endorsement. Captain Blood and his pirate crew do accept King William III's approval and become loyal servants of the British once more following James II's deposal. This seems to indicate that, while the crew may have adopted piracy, their rebellion is on the side of justice, which brings into question whether they were ever piratical criminals or simply victims of tyranny rebelling against an unjust ruler. Nevertheless, the film does much to glorify these pirates.

Interestingly enough, the novel the film is based on was written with the intention of creating a historically plausible while fictional story. Raphael Sabatini, the author of *Captain Blood*, wrote an essay in 1935 detailing the aim of historical fiction. Sabatini asserts that authors of historical fiction must research thoroughly and present as accurate

a picture of the historical period as possible. The events can be fabricated or factual, but the work as a whole should present the period with veracity. Indeed Sabatini maintains that historical fiction should inform about the past more truthfully than popular yet apocryphal historical sources and narratives, providing the stories of William Tell and the Man in the Iron Mask as examples. He even cites which pirate sources he used in writing *Captain Blood*.<sup>3</sup> While the film inevitably altered some of Sabatini's story for the film, it is reasonable to view *Captain Blood* as a serious attempt to create a plausible, historically accurate pirate story. While in the novel Sabatini describes that Captain Blood's articles were more strict in their protection of women than was common, he claims the articles overall as typical for such pirates concerning the division of loot amongst the crew.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Sabatini and the film *Captain Blood* seek to portray a typical pirate crew based on a tightly knit brotherhood of pirates with the extra qualities of protection for women.

The pirates of *Captain Blood* present most of the qualities of the typical romantic pirate. At heart they are a group of men coming together to resist a system that has unjustly persecuted them. By resisting the imperial system, they have renounced masters and kings. Now they only answer to the officers they choose, and should they feel the need, they can replace their captains through mutiny. The pirate crew then can exercise far more freedom than most of their contemporaries. This crew exemplifies the romantic symbol and freedom that pirates depictions emphasize.

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<sup>3</sup> Raphael Sabatini, "Historical Fiction," last modified March 29, 2008, <http://www.rafaelsabatini.com/thoughts-on-writing.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Sabatini, *Captain Blood: His Odyssey* (Originally published Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 278 (iBook).

Interestingly enough, film adaptations of *Treasure Island* depict pirates differently depending on the film. One of the more famous adaptations is the Disney film from 1950 starring Robert Newton as Long John Silver. The film closely follows the novel, and overall the pirates are suitably villainous throughout. Similar to the book itself, this film is important as Robert Newton set the standard for what a pirate ought to sound like with his performance as Long John Silver. Indeed, the men who established International Talk Like a Pirate Day have named him the patron saint of the holiday, crediting him with the addition of “arrrrrr matey” to the traditional pirate vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> This parallels nicely the role of the original novel. Both the novel and this famous film version may not add to the positive image of romanticized pirates, but each has added vital aspects to how the pirates are imagined. Without the trappings added by these two works, many of the favorite pirate tropes would not exist.

A later adaptation, *Muppet Treasure Island*, provides an interesting twist on the idea of the pirate as a heroic figure. The film follows the novel relatively closely with expected deviations for muppet themed antics, but following Jim Hawkins’ kidnapping by the pirates, the pirates break into a musical number titled, “Professional Pirate.” In the song Long John Silver, played by Tim Curry, details why Jim should choose the life of a pirate. He lays out a pretty convincing argument:

True friendship and adventure are what we can’t live without and when you’re a professional pirate, that’s what the jobs about...It’s one for all for one. And we’ll share and share alike with you and love you like a son. We’re gentlemen of fortune and that’s what we’re proud to be. And when you’re a professional pirate: you’ll be honest, brave, and free. The soul of decency. You’ll be loyal and fair

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<sup>5</sup> John Bauer and Mark Summers, “Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed August 8, 2017, <http://talklikeapirate.com/wordpress/frequently-asked-questions/>.

and on the square and most importantly. When you're a professional pirate you're always in the best of company!<sup>6</sup>

While this does all come from the pirate crew, this paints a familiar picture of pirates.

The pirates emphasize the egalitarian nature and bond the crew shares. Pirates are given the most admired qualities like honesty, bravery, and loyalty. The pirates present themselves similarly to how Captain Blood demands his crew to be. They have no nation, only each other, but they still maintain their best qualities despite their criminal nature.

Long John Silver drives his point home further when he directly addresses Jim in the middle of the song. He asks, "Do you really think the captain and the squire are planning to share the treasure with the likes of us?" Silver is wary and unconvinced that the captain and the squire, both upper class men, will give the lower class sailors their due and share in the loot. Hence Silver makes the offer, "Join us lad. Donate your compass to the treasure hunt and get a full share!"<sup>7</sup> This does highlight the more egalitarian nature of pirate loot, where each member of the crew receives a comparable share. This parallels a scene in *Captain Blood* showing how loot is dispersed, when the Captain distributes a share to each crew member plus the amount due for injury per the charter. Silver presents a strong temptation for Jim to join the pirates.

The song is not without some self aware jabs at the nature of pirates. Most obviously Silver admits that "on occasion there may be someone you have to execute." Even in the song the violent nature of pirates can't be escaped. Furthermore, Silver sings, "Some say that pirates steal and should be feared and hated. I say we're victims of bad press it's all exaggerated." This claim is damaged by the appearance of a knife and the

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<sup>6</sup> *Muppet Treasure Island*, directed by Brian Henson, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

theft of a watch as Silver sings, “We’d never stab you in the back. We’d never lie or cheat.” Silver’s conclusion, “We’re just about the nicest guys you’d ever want to meet,” remains unconvincing.<sup>8</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, a musical number in the children’s movie *Muppet Treasure Island* presents a nuanced picture of piracy. From the pirates’ point of view they are friendly, progressive, and protective, and the film even adds a layer of complexity by pointing out the mistruths and violence of piracy.

Another depictions of pirates in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films of the 2000s and 2010s blur the lines and portray multiple visions of piracy. While magic plays a strong role in the films, especially in the sequels, the films do incorporate some surprisingly accurate elements. Interestingly, the pirate crews featured in the first film, *Curse of the Black Pearl* from 2003, show far more diversity than many pirate films, especially *Captain Blood*. Both crews, the villainous (sometimes skeletal) crew of the *Black Pearl* and Jack Sparrow’s ragtag crew, contain people of color, something that even *Captain Blood*’s crew made up of former slaves lacks.<sup>9</sup> The Caribbean was a diverse place, and as will be discussed later, people of color cannot be excluded from the history of pirates. Furthermore, in the third film *At World’s End* from 2007, the film introduces a host of pirates from many nations: Mistress Ching from China, Sumbhajee from the Middle East, Sao Feng from Singapore, Jocard from Africa, and Ammand from the Barbary Coast, in addition to the European pirates Barbossa, Jack Sparrow, Chevalle, and Villanueva, all drive home the point that piracy arises everywhere, not only in the

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<sup>8</sup> *Muppet Treasure Island*.

<sup>9</sup> *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*, directed by Gore Verbinski, 2003.

Atlantic or Caribbean, and not only white Europeans became celebrated pirates.<sup>10</sup> Most of these characters do not receive much screen time or elaboration, making them closer to caricatures, but they show a genuine attempt to portray piracy as the diverse world that it was. The film may play fast and loose with the timeline, combining pirates from different time periods, but the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films do strive to portray the pirate world as a diverse one.

The films also continually reference the “Pirate’s Code,” though the film does not attempt to stick to the few known facts about such a code. The code in the films in a way parallels the articles of Captain Blood, defining acceptable and unacceptable practices while also declaring which punishments suit which crimes. However, the Pirates Code applies to all pirate crews no matter the captain. Rather than a single article agreed to by a crew, the Code is a vast series of laws and customs that all pirates are meant to follow. Characters at various times discuss the rules of parlay and the division of loot covered by the code, and the rule “If a man falls behind, he’s left behind” is introduced and broken multiple times during the film.<sup>11</sup> While pirate crews did sometimes adopt rules as will be discussed later, the idea of an all encompassing set of laws laid down by earlier pirates and kept in a large tome as depicted in the third film bears little resemblance to fact.<sup>12</sup> Despite the great liberties, the inclusion of a code does show another aspect of pirate history that the films attempt to utilize in good faith.

On the other hand, the films also engage heavily with the romanticized heroic pirate image. Granted, in the first film the crew of the *Black Pearl* terrorize Port Royal

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<sup>10</sup> *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End*, directed by Gore Verbinski, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> *Curse of the Black Pearl*.

<sup>12</sup> *At World’s End*.

and attack the Royal Navy as well as the other pirate crew, aligning more closely with *Treasure Island*'s depiction of pirates. However, Captain Jack Sparrow allows the film to reveal the heroic and best qualities of pirates. He and his pirate crew, while not strictly allies to the Royal Navy, lead the battle against the evil pirates, while simultaneously rebelling against the imperial powers. This continues in the sequels when the pirates continue to undermine the authority of the British East India Company. Romantic and heroic depictions of pirates often emphasize this anti-imperial nature. Furthermore, Jack Sparrow describes the ultimate goal of being a pirate saying, "What a ship is, what the Black Pearl really is, is freedom," echoing the most common of romantic pirate notions. Being a pirate means having only the master one chooses and ranging far wider than most could ever dream. The pirates in *The Pirates of the Caribbean* undoubtedly fall into the romanticized, idealized pirates.

Interestingly enough, this idealizing of pirates can also be seen behind the scenes of this film, as Johnny Depp's idea of pirates absolutely played a role in his portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow. In an interview for the film Depp described how he used Keith Richards, the famous guitarist for the Rolling Stones, as inspiration for his character, leading Richards to be cast as his father in the third film. Both Depp and Richards describe how they view pirates as comparable to rock stars, finding many similarities. They both latch onto the "very democratic" ideals of pirates and the "potential freedom, to break out of bounds." When asked about a purported quote of Richards, "I fly under no

flag, I'm a musician," Richards loves the connection between himself and pirates.<sup>13</sup> To both Richards and Depp, pirates not only serve as a sort of democratic, egalitarian force, they also resemble counter-culture figures and should be celebrated as rock stars. Knowing that this perspective informed Depp's performance, it comes as no surprise that *Pirates of the Caribbean* would portray pirates favorably, showing the best romanticized image.

An interesting evolution of pirates as heroes appears in this history of piratical portrayals. The early depictions like the book and film *Treasure Island* firmly portray pirates as villains, reflecting societal mores of the Victorian 19<sup>th</sup> century and the American 1950s. *Captain Blood* might seem surprising in depicting heroic pirates in the 1930s, but it's important to remember that Captain Blood and his crew are vindicated in the end and end up on the lawful side, while the pirate Levasseur is a secondary antagonist. The film does not so much attempt to paint pirates as heroes, but rather reveal a singular group of men who are embracing justice while ignoring the law. In some ways this reflects a wider societal feeling of the Great Depression, similar to the feelings that would lead to celebration of certain bank robbers. *Captain Blood* is then notable in some ways, but does not fully celebrate piracy. However, later depictions like *Pirates of the Caribbean* fully support and embrace pirates as heroic figures. There are evil pirates for sure, but the good pirates in those films are pirates through and through. The first film even ends with Elizabeth Swann proudly declaring that her beloved is not a blacksmith, but a pirate. This reflects a wider trend in popular culture that embraces unconventional

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<sup>13</sup> David Wild, "Keith Richards and Johnny Depp: Blood Brothers," *Rolling Stone*, May 31, 2007, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/keith-richards-and-johnny-depp-blood-brothers-20070531>.



heroes and celebrates anti-heroes. This especially appears after the 1960s and 1970s when many especially young people in the US grew distrustful of traditional power structures and authorities. Thus, it is important to note that the context of these popular depictions often dictates how sympathetic these pirates will be.

While far more depictions of pirates vary in small ways and each provides a unique perspective, we can draw a fairly cohesive picture of the democratic pirate. Preeminently, pirates serve as a popular symbol for freedom. Pirate stories are told again and again because stories of the freedom and adventure satisfy a need for escapism and fantasies of a freer, more eventful life. This ideal of freedom is key. To become a pirate crew, a group of sailors take their fate in their own hands, casting off the masters and controls that those in power have chosen. Pirates choose who they will follow and reserve the capability to withdraw that support should their captain prove inadequate. A pirate crew sails where they choose and when they choose. They care not for the laws of empires or nations, only their own laws and that of their chosen comrades. Some popular sources also touch on deeper issues of class divide and progressive, egalitarian natures. The fact that each pirate crew drafted and decided its own laws meant that prejudices of the day could fail in the face of enough crewmen dedicated to welcome any into their ranks. Furthermore, while death loomed large over a pirate crew, each pirate knew of their guarantee of a share of the loot often beyond a common sailor's wildest dreams of wealth, perhaps the greatest reward for this romantic view of the pirate. While plenty of narratives present pirates as villainous and evil murderers, the romantic pirate dominates popular portrayals from *Captain Blood* to *Pirates of the Caribbean*. And even at their most villainous, the pirates of *Treasure Island* for example still look out for and protect

their own. And Long John Silver even looked out for a cabin boy who refused to join with the pirates. It's no small wonder so many say "Yo ho! Yo ho! A pirate's life for me!"

### **The Historical Pirate**

When attempting to discover the fact behind the romantic symbol of pirates, one quickly runs into the problem of biased and exaggerated sources. Due to their criminal nature, historical descriptions of pirates tend toward the denunciatory or celebratory. The vast majority of sources describing the deeds of pirates fall into two categories: trial records or varyingly sensationalized popular accounts. Both unsurprisingly contain flaws, mistruths, and biases. To get to the facts of pirates during the Golden Age of Piracy, these myriad sources need to be referenced against one another along with a healthy amount of reading between the lines, but when one does, a surprising amount of sources support aspects of the romantic pirate myth. While few support all the romantic pirate ideals, the source of those ideals is not difficult to discover.

Most of the famous pirates commonly known today were active in a period known as The Golden Age of Piracy. This era came about in the early 1700s following a series of intense colonial wars between the European Atlantic empires. Following the conclusion of these conflicts, the Caribbean was awash with sailors recently relieved of Naval duty, with few job prospects, but the skills of sailing and combat. It is little surprise that so many turned to piracy. While there are a number of famous pirates from the century before, the 1710s and 1720s spawned many notorious pirates.

*A General History of the Pyrates* provides the tales for many of the most famous pirates of the Golden Age and details episodes that strongly relate to the symbol of the

romantic pirate. Written by a mysterious Captain Johnson, whom some believe to possibly Daniel Defoe, this work has served as inspiration for much of the pirate literature that came after. Published in 1724, shortly after many of the subjects had been active in the 1710s and early 1720s, many of the accounts of the pirate crews within the book read like a combination of swashbuckling yarn and historical accounts. A second volume followed in 1728 containing the profiles of even more pirates, though this volume contains some outright fabrication that brings the authenticity of the whole volume into question.<sup>14</sup> Despite some shortcomings, *A General History* is extremely important for first collecting the stories of the most famous pirates that are still repeated today.

Each pirate crew's profile contain plenty of descriptions of piratical attacks and violence, but each one also contains similarities with the symbol of the romantic pirate. In the lengthy profile of the career of Captain Bartholomew Roberts, Johnson describes Roberts' election as captain, despite his distaste for the life, apparently saying, "since he had dipp'd his Hands in muddy Water, and must be a Pyrate, it was better being a Commander than a common Man."<sup>15</sup> Despite this reluctance, his first exploit as captain leads him and his crew to burn down a Portuguese fort and burn the ships in the nearby port out of revenge for the previously slayed captain, and Roberts achieves great success until a foolhardy chase of a prize ship that escapes leaves him with only a small sloop and skeleton crew after a large portion of the crew desert.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly enough this catastrophe leads to Roberts to draft a set of articles for his new reduced pirate crew,

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<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Kuhn, *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* (London: T. Warner, 1724), 221, <http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/17001>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 210–11, 223–24.

famously setting a precedent for many popular works to emulate.<sup>17</sup> Johnson reports the articles as follows:

- I. Every Man has a Vote in Affairs of Moment; has equal Title to the fresh Provisions, or strong Liquors, at any Time seized, and use them at pleasure, unless a Scarcity make it necessary, for the good of all, to vote a Retrenchment.
  - II. Every Man to be called fairly in turn, by Lift, on Board of Prizes, because, (over and above their proper Share,) they were on these Occasions allowed a Shift of Cloaths; But if they defrauded the Company to the Value of a Dollar, in Plate, Jewels, or Money, Marooning was their Punishment. If the Robbery was only between one another, they contented themselves with flitting the Ears and Nose of him that was Guilty, and set him on Shore, not in an uninhabited Place, but somewhere, where he was sure to encounter Hardships.
  - III. No Person to Game at Cards or Dice for Money.
  - IV. The Lights and Candles to be put out at eight o'Clock at Night: If any of the Crew, after that Hour, still remained inclined for Drinking, they were to do it on the open Deck.
  - V. To keep their Piece, Pistols and Cutlash clean and fit for Service.
  - VI. No Boy or Woman to be allowed amongst them. If any Man were found seducing any of the latter Sex, and carried her to Sea, disguised, he was to suffer Death.
  - VII. To Desert the Ship, or their Quarters in Battle, was punished with Death, or Marooning.
  - VIII. No striking one another on Board, but every Man's Quarrels to be ended on Shore, at Sword and Pistol. [With some clarification by Johnson as to what form the duel takes]
  - IX. No Man to talk of breaking up their Way of Living, till each had shared a 1000 l. If in order to this, any Man should lose a Limb, or become a Cripple in their Service, he was to have 800 Dollars, out of the publick Stock, and for lesser Hurts, proportionally.
  - X. The Captain and Quarter-Master to receive two Shares of a Prize; the Master, Boatwain, and Gunner, one share and a half, and other Officers, one and a Quarter.
  - XI. The Musicians to have Rest on the Sabbath Day, but the other six Days and Nights, none without special Favour.<sup>18</sup>
- Many of these articles come as no surprise. The division of loot and compensation

for wounds shows the basis of some of the democratic ideals applied to pirates. Similarly,

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<sup>17</sup> See Captain Blood's articles quoted earlier as well as "The Pirate's Code set down by Morgan and Bartholomew" in *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 230–33. Johnson also adds that as the original document was lost, there was possibly more to their agreement "too horrid to be disclosed."

the guarantee of a vote and supply of liquor lives up to the romantic pirate standard. Interestingly the articles show a stricter side of pirate life not often mentioned. The requirement to maintain one's weapons, a fairly early light's out time, and regulations against gambling indicate a stricter discipline from Captain Roberts than one might expect of pirates. Also despite their criminal nature, the articles reveal strong punishments for crimes against the crew, emphasizing the importance of the bond of the crew. The requirement of settling disputes among the crew by duel and the forbidden nature of women aboard seem to also jump right out of a classic pirate story. Overall these articles, with a few exceptions, seem to confirm much of the romantic pirate ideal. The democratic nature and the strong fraternal bond stand out beside the expected violent and sometimes brutal nature of piracy.

Other pirate episodes further confirm many of these notions, especially piratical democracy. The account of pirate captain Charles Vane displays the seemingly democratic nature of pirates in full. When a French Man of War seemed determine to chase Vane's brigantine and sloop, some pirates called to fight while others preferred to flee. Though Vane "made use of his power to determine this Dispute, which, in these Cafes, is absolute and uncontrollable, by their own Laws, viz. in fighting, chafing, or being chafed; in all other Matters whatsoever, he is governed by a Majority," the crew voted and declared him a coward after escaping the Man of War, opting to name an officer named John Rackham the new captain.<sup>19</sup> Clearly while pirate captains wielded considerable power, their power depended on the approval of the rest of the crew. A pirate captain who failed to win their support could not count on retaining the position of

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 145–46.

captain for long. Piratical democracy seems to have empowered common sailors before many of the lower classes could dream of such power.

And this power clearly drew many to the pirate lifestyle, as Johnson indicated in his chapter detailing the career of Captain Edward England. Johnson lists the ships taken by the pirate crew as prizes off the coast of Africa and details the number of crewmen on each ship. Interestingly enough, each ship had portions of its crew join the pirates. In just the spring of 1719, the *Eagle* had 7 of 17 men turn pirate; the *Charlotte* and the *Sarah* 3 of 18 each; the *Bentworth* 12 of 30; the *Buck* 2 of 2; the *Carteret* and the *Mercury* 5 of 18 each; the *Coward* 4 of 13; and the *Elizabeth* and *Katherine* 4 of 14 collectively.<sup>20</sup> If these records reveal anything, many common sailors apparently thirsted for the freedom that membership of a pirate crew brought. Though it is important to note once again that it is unclear where this Johnson gets this data, and how accurate it is. Even if it is in fact accurate, one might wonder what the options are for a crewmember who does not turn pirate would be, especially with pirates' penchant for killing. The pirate lifestyle does however appear desirable and piracy's reputation as a democratic institution would only aid in recruiting.

The romantic pirate crew seems relatively accurate, and the account of Captain Samuel Bellamy distills the motivation to turn pirate exceedingly clearly. After seizing, plundering, and burning the vessel of one Captain Beer, Bellamy is purported to have said to him:

D—m my Bl—d, I am forry they won't let you have your Sloop again, for I scorn to do any one a Mischief, when it is not for my Advantage: damn the Sloop, we muft sink her, and she might be of Use to you. Tho', damn ye, you are a sneaking

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 115–116.

Puppy, and fo are all those who will submit to be governed by Laws which rich Men have made for their own Security, for the cowardly Whelps have not the Courage otherwise to defend what they get by their Knavery; but damn ye altogether; Damn them for a Pack of crafty Rascals, and you, who serve them, for a Parcel of hen-hearted Numskuls. They vilify us, the Scoundrels do, when there is only this Difference, they rob the Poor under the Cover of Law, forfooth, and we plunder the Rich under the Protection of our own Courage; had you not better make One of us, than sneak after the A—s of those Villains for Employment? [Captain Beer claims to turn pirate would violate God's law.] You are a devilish Conscience Rascal, d—n ye. I am a free Prince, and I have as much Authority to make War on the whole World, as he who has a hundred Sail of Ships at Sea and an Army of 100,000 Men in the Field; and this my Conscience tells me; but there is no arguing with such sniveling Puppies, who allow Superiors to kick them about Deck at Pleasure; and pin their Faith upon a Pimp of a Parson; a Squab, who neither practices nor believes what he puts upon the chuckle-headed Fools he preaches to.——<sup>21</sup>

With this quote Samuel Bellamy essentially lays out the many motivations for embracing piracy, which all cast the pirates as heroes. The quote is suspiciously eloquent, and as the second volume from whence it comes has more dubious authenticity as mentioned before, one must be careful in treating it as too authentic. Nevertheless, this excerpt from one of the more widely read histories of pirates in the Golden Age provides strong support, if not outright endorsement, of the symbol of the romantic pirate. Bellamy elucidates the class struggle that pirates embody, rebelling against the laws of the upper class and countering their thievery with thievery. He questions the source of their power, casting doubt on the totality of imperial power with his own authority derived from the support of his crew and their capability of violence. Bellamy claims the pirates refuse to bow to such false idols, including even a denunciation of organized religion. Here the egalitarian nature of piracy, the class struggle, the personal freedom, and political power of the pirate reveals its full splendor. According to Captain Samuel Bellamy, the romantic

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Johnson, *The History of the Pyrates*, vol. 2 (London: T. Woodward, 1728), 220, <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/17002>.

symbol of the pirate is neither romantic nor symbol, but pure fact. However, not all of Johnson's pirate histories support the symbol so well, and some of the tales depict pirates along much more villainous lines.

Examples of pirate greed reveal that the egalitarian nature of pirates was not always entirely factual. In Johnson's account of Captain Henry Avery, he reveals himself as a greedier pirate captain than Roberts, Vane, Rackham, England, or Bellamy by far. After the famous episode capturing a ship of the "Great Mogul" of the Mughal Empire of present day India, Avery decided that his pirate fleet had grown too large and, after convincing the men on the smaller sloops of the fleet that the great wealth they had recently acquired would be safer on his flagship, Avery and the crew of his flagship slipped away in the middle of the night, leaving the rest of the pirates without a single share of the great loot.<sup>22</sup> While pirate crews may have operated under the system ensuring a share of the loot for each crewman, a devious captain could clearly upset such an arrangement for his own enrichment. Avery's greed reveals that though many pirate crews held ideals about division of profits, these ideals were not always held so sacred by all pirates. A similar episode is featured in the account of Captain Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard. A comparable idea to Avery struck Blackbeard, as he felt his fleet had grown too large and decided that he'd rather keep the lion's share of the recent ransom paid by the denizens of Charlestown for him and his closest associates. Deviously, he grounds two ships in an inlet and when the third ship comes to assist, he puts all the treasure aboard and after marooning what crew was left, Blackbeard and his

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 50–53.



closest shipmates sail off to enjoy the heap of loot in pseudo-retirement.<sup>23</sup> While pirates are often celebrated and depicted with a fiercely democratic nature, it was far from a guarantee.

Speaking of Blackbeard, most of Johnson's account of him serves to undermine the entire heroic pirate image, as most of the stories depict him as a cruel, wicked man with a unhinged mad streak. Examples of this nature are numerous. Blackbeard at one point blockaded the port of Charleston in Carolina, capturing any who tried to enter or leave and holding them prisoner until the governor paid him a hefty ransom in loot and precious medicine.<sup>24</sup> Later, Blackbeard decided to retire to a plantation in North Carolina where he strong armed his way to legitimacy, having all the ships he had taken in his piratical career declared legally his and taking his, according to Johnson, fourteenth wife, whom Johnson also claims Blackbeard "would force to prostitute herself" to "five or six of his brutal Companions."<sup>25</sup> Reportedly, Blackbeard once told his men, "Come, let us make a Hell of our own, and try how long we can bear it," before taking them below decks, and in a sealed room, lit fire and brimstone until his men begged to be let out.<sup>26</sup> Another tale has Blackbeard in his cabin with the Pilot of the ship and his first mate Israel Hands, and without warning, Blackbeard blows out the candle and fires two pistols he had been preparing under the table, missing the pilot but striking Hands' knee. Purportedly, when asked why, Blackbeard responded that "if he did not now and then kill

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<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 74–75.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–74.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 75–76.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

one of them, they would forget who he was.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, there are more well known stories of Blackbeard’s affinity for lighting matches stuck in his hat during battle to surround himself with smoke and fire, as well as accounts from his crewmen of a mysterious stranger who appeared and disappeared from the ship, thought to be the devil visiting Blackbeard.<sup>28</sup> Frankly, the stories of Blackbeard often seem to stretch the limits of possibility, but Johnson presents him as a singular figure, described as “that courageous Brute, who might have pass’d in the World for a Heroe, had he been employed in a good cause.”<sup>29</sup> Blackbeard serves as an example of the utmost villainy that piracy can bring about. If piracy frees men from societal bonds, it is no surprise that some could use such freedom for their most depraved and wicked desires. Just as some historical pirates exemplify the symbol of the romantic pirate hero, other pirates fulfill the villainous, evil pirate ideal.

Another pirate who does fit the romantic pirate ideal is Captain Henry Morgan, a buccaneer from a slightly earlier period of piracy, the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Spain still dominated the Caribbean, whose career bears more semblance to the villainous pirate than the romantic pirate ideal. Johnson does not speak of Captain Morgan. Rather, the account of his life comes from a first hand account from *The Buccaneers of America*, an account written by a former buccaneer John Esquemeling. Esquemeling details Morgan’s humble origin as the son of a farmer who, hoping to find work as a sailor, is tricked and sold into slavery in the Caribbean until he buys his freedom and joins a group of English

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 86–87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 89.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

buccaneers.<sup>30</sup> In one instance, Captain Morgan and his crew attacked the Spanish town of Puerto del Principe in Cuba. While the Governor attempted to fend off the buccaneer attack, their skill at arms and Morgan's threat, "If you surrender not voluntarily, you shall soon see the town in a flame, and your wives and children torn in pieces before your faces," brought about the surrender of the town.<sup>31</sup> During the sacking of the town, Morgan and his crew

enclosed all the Spaniards, both men, women, children and slaves, in several churches; and gathered all the goods they could find by way of pillage. Afterwards they searched the whole country round about the town, bringing in day by day many goods and prisoners, with much provision. With this they fell to banqueting among themselves in the customary way, without remembering the poor prisoners, whom they permitted to starve in the churches. In the meanwhile they ceased not to torment them daily after an inhuman manner, thereby to make them confess where they had hid their goods, moneys and other things, though little or nothing was left them. To this effect they punished also the women and little children, giving them nothing to eat; whereby the greatest part perished.<sup>32</sup>

This account of Morgan's attack matches the traditional depiction of the villainous pirates sacking the town with little regard for the lives of the inhabitants, aiming only to gain the most loot from the attack. This intense cruelty reveals an important caveat to the progressive egalitarian pirate crew. The members of the crew may gain greater political power and a newfound freedom, but pirates rarely extend such progressive treatment to others. A near identical series of events follows when Morgan attacked Porto Bello in Spanish Costa Rica. While the narrative relates the thrilling battle

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<sup>30</sup> John Esquemeling, *The Buccaneers of America*, ed. Henry Powell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, originally published New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 120. This section will continue to use the term Buccaneer rather than strictly pirate. "The term Buccaneer, in French Boucanier, is usually applied to certain pirates who during the seventeenth century committed great ravages upon the Spanish settlements in the West Indies," from Henry Powell's Introduction, v.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 135–36.

where Morgan defeats the better positioned and numbered Spanish garrison with his superior cunning and ferocity, the aftermath plays out much the same when “having plundered all they could find, they began to examine some of the prisoners... charging them severely to discover where they had hidden their riches and goods. But not being able to extort anything out of them, as they were not the right persons who possessed any wealth, they at last resolved to torture them.”<sup>33</sup> This account also serves to reinforce the idea that piratical progressivism only extended to the crews, not to those they attack. Granted, the piratical activities of Morgan and the buccaneers of his day had a few important differences than the piracy of the later figures such as Captain England, Captain Rackham, and Captain Bellamy.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, this is a key factor that even applies to the later pirates. Pirates may have wielded greater political power, possessed greater freedom, and embraced a more egalitarian, democratic society, but that society only included those in the pirate crews. Pirate freedom only extended to pirates.

Interestingly enough, even many modern historical scholars put a strong emphasis on piratical freedom and the democratic systems pirates established. In some ways, one need not search for popular depictions that glorify pirates, as many scholarly sources treat and put pirates in a similar light. In their history of the Atlantic, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker reserve for pirates a special role. Linebaugh and Rediker declare pirates a major force in the Atlantic, as pirates play the most important role in describing a

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<sup>33</sup> Esquemeling, *Buccaneers of America*, 142–46.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Powell, “Introduction” in *Buccaneers of America*, vi–xiii. “The Dutch, French, and English colonies in the West Indies [were not] afflicted with many scruples as to the propriety of allowing filibusters [another common term for pirates of the day] to...cruise against their Spanish neighbors.” The *Buccaneers* had tacit government approval from their respective mother countries and a loose agreement to only attack the Spanish, as opposed to the later, predominantly stateless pirates.

“hydrarchy from below” through their “multicultural, multiracial, multinational social order.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Linebaugh and Rediker emphasize that pirates were “democratic in an undemocratic age,” “egalitarian in a hierarchical age,” and “class-conscious and justice seeking, taking revenge against merchant captains who tyrannized the common seaman.”<sup>36</sup> Pirates even fulfill Marxist desires “by expropriating a merchant ship (after mutiny or capture), pirates seized the means of maritime production and declared it to be the common property of those who did the work.”<sup>37</sup> Overall, pirates come across in this telling as class warriors, struggling against the upper classes and imperial forces that wish to dominate and expropriate the wealth of the lower classes, including the poor seamen who became pirates. Linebaugh and Rediker’s writings on piracy sound more similar to Long John Silver’s song, rivaling Johnson’s *General History* for rosiest view of pirates.

And Marcus Rediker’s other writings only continue to preach the gospel of the pirate. He sums up the pirate system as “a rough, but effective, egalitarianism that placed authority in the collective hands of the crew.”<sup>38</sup> These pirates came from all sorts of backgrounds, though mostly lower class including common sailors, Navy seamen, fishermen, New World woodsmen, or indentured servants escaping from their masters.<sup>39</sup> To Rediker, pirates represent a radical movement by those in the lower classes to seize power and achieve unheard of levels of freedom. There seems little difference from the romanticized accounts of piracy in *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Captain Blood*.

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 162.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 162–63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 61.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–46.

Importantly, other scholars often cite Rediker's work as support, showing the power of this perception of pirates. Gabriel Kuhn, for one, cites Rediker often, including when describing the solidarity of pirates, revealing a class unity dangerous to the powers that be.<sup>40</sup> Even scholars who are skeptical of this view of pirates cannot escape Rediker. Hans Turley makes plain that he believes that the "real pirate" cannot be separated from the mythology, pointing out that Johnson's *A General History* should be considered "as much 'fiction' as it is history."<sup>41</sup> Yet Turley engages with Rediker's views on piracy, incorporating Rediker's points on class and othering of pirates into his discussion of pirate masculinities and sexual culture.<sup>42</sup> This view of pirates as class actors serves as a dominant lens through which to view pirates. One present historical consensus is that the democratic egalitarian qualities of pirates so emphasized in popular depictions are in fact based in fact. According to many scholars, piracy did serve as a progressive world allowing greater freedom for many. When Captain Jack Sparrow said a pirate ship is freedom, many scholars would agree with him.

Importantly, all of the previous pirate accounts, heroic or villainous, have a previously unmentioned, but obvious factor in common. Every pirate tale involves violence. Even more importantly, this undeniable aspect of pirate life often is separated from discussions of pirate progressivism in historical scholarship. Be it Morgan's sacking of towns or Blackbeard's grenading of ships, this aspect of piratical life is taken for granted alongside their progressive nature. The historical pirate did indeed have much in

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<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, 89, plus the large index entry for Rediker, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1,3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

common with the romantic symbol of piracy, namely achieving and embodying great freedom, but this freedom required and in some ways was based upon violence, often against those very same classes of people who did not enjoy piratical freedom. When pirate ships attack towns under the control of a European empire, they may be striking a blow against the imperial power, but so often it is the common people who supply the loot a pirate ship relies upon. Piratical progressivism may be a historical fact, but the romantic symbol, and even some of the historical scholars, often downplay the damage done by these pirates enjoying their freedom on their own class comrades.

### **Limits of Pirate Progressivism**

When previously discussing the progressivism of piracy, there has been an underlying assumption. When discussing piratical egalitarianism and democracy, an undeniably fraternal nature has lurked beneath the surface. Women have been noticeably absent from these narratives, excusing hostages and victims. Clearly, European maritime culture entailed dominant masculinity based on difficult labor and rough work thought unsuitable for women. The violence that piracy entails would also exclude women, just as women were not allowed to join the army. In spite of these restrictions, some women did go to sea and some even became successful pirates. Many more women interacted with pirates on different terms, often hostile and violent. These women are left out of the romanticized pirate picture, and in some ways their actions and their treatment contradicts elements of the idea of the democratic pirate symbol. While records of seagoing women are scarce, it is important to analyze women in the piratical world, as their experiences showed how much there was to gain from piratical progressivism, as well as the hypocrisy of such a society.

Two such women, Mary Read and Anne Bonny, made themselves famous in their careers as pirates, flouting the regulations of the gendered maritime world in the Atlantic during Golden Age of Piracy. In *A General History of the Pyrates*, Johnson highlights Read and Bonny's stories. Indeed Mary Read and Anne Bonny are so notable in Johnson's eyes that they even merit mentioning on the detailed title page of the book: "A General History of the Pyrates, From their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of *Providence*, to the present time. With the remarkable Actions and Adventures of the two Female Pyrates Mary Read and Anne Bonny."<sup>43</sup>

These two women have extraordinary stories that Johnson chooses to prominently include, no matter their factual accuracy. According to Johnson, Mary Read was born to a poor English widow who dressed her daughter up as a boy to help earn money, and Mary Read continued to cross dress, joining the army and eventually marrying a comrade. Her husband died shortly after, and Mary Read took a job aboard a ship, again disguised as a man, until a pirate attack, after which she joined with the pirates.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Anne Bonny's father was an Irish attorney, who left for Carolina with his former housemaid to escape the societal consequences of having a daughter with such a prominently lower class counterpart. In Carolina, Anne Bonny could have led a societally accepted life, but she was disowned for marrying a seaman and ended up in Providence, where she met the pirate John Rackham. She fell in love and disguised herself as a man to join him aboard his ship, the same ship that Mary Read would later join.<sup>45</sup> The two women learned the truth of each other's identity aboard, and Captain Rackham soon

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<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, Title Page.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–61.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–73.



learned of Mary Read's secret after he threatened to kill him/her for spending too much time with Anne Bonny.<sup>46</sup> From Johnson's account, these two women from distinctly different backgrounds each ended up disguising themselves as men and serving Captain Jack Rackham's pirate crew together. Beyond the obvious massive coincidence, the lives of these two women contradict the idea of the fraternal pirate crew simply by having served on the crew. Interestingly, these two women did more than simply serve on the crew.

In Johnson's account, Read and Bonny are described as exceptional pirates, often more capable than the men. Indeed, at their trial members of the crew claimed: "In Times of Action, no Person amongst them were more resolute, or ready to Board or undertake any thing that was hazardous, as she [Mary Read] and *Anne Bonny*."<sup>47</sup> In one particularly colorful event, Johnson describes a battle aboard the ship. When the enemy had boarded, "none kept the deck except *Mary Read* and *Anne Bonny* and one more," and furthermore, Mary Read shouted at the rest of the crew hiding below deck "to come up and fight like Men, and finding they did not stir, fired her Arms down the Hold amongst them, killing one, and wounding others."<sup>48</sup> Mary Read and Anne Bonny were clearly a formidable duo, more so than the rest of their pirate shipmates. In another episode, Johnson further describes Mary Read's dangerous skills. She fell in love with one of her shipmates, revealing her sex, but when her lover was to duel another member of the crew to settle a dispute, Read challenged him and "appointed the Time two Hours sooner than when he was to meet her Lover, where she fought him at Sword and Pistol, and killed him upon the

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<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 162.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 161–62.

Spot.”<sup>49</sup> Not only were Mary Read and Anne Bonny ready and able to fight more than the rest of the crew, Mary Read was more skilled at combat than her male pirate compatriots. In Johnson’s account, these two women are the most dangerous and skilled pirates in Rackham’s crew.

As previously mentioned, Johnson’s account has its limits. Apparently, Johnson drew on court records, other published accounts, and interviews, but, similarly to Hans Turley, Margarete Lincoln points out, Johnson and “contemporaries understood ‘history’ to include accounts of wondrous happenings and other non-factual material.”<sup>50</sup> In terms of the account of their piratical careers, there are independent sources that corroborate Johnson’s descriptions.<sup>51</sup> The account of their lives before joining Rackham’s crew do not have similar parallel accounts, however, and Johnson appears to have invented appropriate histories that he believed would justify their piratical careers and “bring context, coherence and validity for a startling, unprecedented episode.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore the accounts of Mary Read and Anne Bonny are likely a mixture of truth and less than true accounts. Interestingly enough, Johnson points out that some would doubt the veracity of their story, as “the odd Incidents of their rambling Lives are such, that some may be tempted to think the whole Story no better than a Novel or a Romance.”<sup>53</sup> On the other hand Johnson also claims that the entire episode had “many thousand Witnessess

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<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 163–64.

<sup>50</sup> Margarete Lincoln, *British Pirates and Society, 1680-1730* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 16.

<sup>51</sup> Rediker, *Villains*, 107–9.

<sup>52</sup> John C. Appleby, *Women and English Piracy, 1540–1720: Partners and Victims in Crime*

(Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013) 208–12.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 157.

[meaning] the people of *Jamaica*, who were present at their Tryals, and heard the stories of their Lives.”<sup>54</sup> Thus it is difficult to judge the authenticity of this particular account, but Johnson does point out that this account that sounds especially dramatic comes direct from the source. Read and Bonny’s story should be taken with a grain of salt, but that does not diminish the power of their story, or the consequences that such an account of women on the Atlantic Ocean entails.

The story of Read and Bonny affects the image of Golden Age historical piracy in multiple ways, and their success in an overtly masculine world is not to be overlooked. From one perspective, these women escaped from the societal limits imposed on lower class women and crafted “opportunities for themselves in a highly gender-unequal world,” and furthermore, Read and Bonny thrived in a dominantly masculine world, though this was through adoption of masculine behavior and qualities.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Read and Bonny’s stories seem to fit right along side the romantic ideal of the pirate story. This becomes more impressive by examining the risks and dangers of a life at sea. Some justified this masculine world of the ship through the fact that it involved rigorous physical duties requiring the physical strength that allows one to load heavy cargo or raise large canvas sails, introducing great danger of bodily harm. Others claimed that any amount of sexuality aboard a ship would harm the hierarchy and discipline required aboard a ship, as well as the fact that women would simply distract the men from their duties.<sup>56</sup> Despite these societal restrictions, Read and Bonny directly contradicted them

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 157.

<sup>55</sup> Shani D’Cruze and Louise A. Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 55–6.

<sup>56</sup> Rediker, *Villains*, 110–11.

by thriving aboard a ship as equal members of a pirate crew. By adopting male personas, these women successfully proved that they were as capable as any man. Golden age historical piracy may have been overwhelmingly male and masculine, but a few women did subvert that custom. Even more impressive is the question of their cross dressing, further elaborated upon in sources other than Johnson.

Other sources such as trial records indicate a more complex picture than that presented in Johnson's history. According to one Dorothy Thomas, Mary Read and Anne Bonny were amongst the crew that took her vessel, and, armed with cutlass and pistol, urged to Murder Thomas, but Thomas could determine they were both women due to the size of their breasts.<sup>57</sup> While one witness simply named them as aboard Rackham's ship, two Frenchmen, John Besneck and Peter Cornelian, claimed "that when they saw any Vessel, gave Chase, or Attacked, they wore Men's Cloaths; and, at other Times, they wore Women's Cloathes; That they did not seem to be kept, or detain'd by Force, but of their own Free-Will and Consent," and additionally Bonny supplied powder for cannons as a "powder monkey," a job normally reserved for women and children.<sup>58</sup> Also, another witness Thomas Dillon, declared both Bonny and Read "were both very profligate, cursing and swearing much, and very ready and willing to do any Thing on Board."<sup>59</sup> Apparently these women did not even need to adopt masculine personas to thrive aboard Rackham's ship as the romantic pirate symbol would lead us to believe. These women were simply part of the crew without regard for the societal norms and maritime customs

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<sup>57</sup> "The Tryals of Captain John Rackham," in *British Piracy and the Golden Age*, vol. 3, ed. Joel H. Baer (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 27.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. Appleby, *Women and English Piracy*, 217–18.

<sup>59</sup> "The Tryals of Captain John Rackham," 28.

of the day. However, both women did become pregnant while aboard the ship, providing them with a defense that precluded their execution beside the rest of the crew, and their physical condition may have changed their duties aboard the ship.<sup>60</sup> In light of this testimony the story of Mary Read and Anne Bonny becomes even more remarkable. These two women thrived in a dominantly masculine world amongst a crew of men isolated on the Atlantic during the Golden Age of Piracy, and they would dress as men only temporarily as a matter of practicality. Not only does this enhance Read and Bonny's character, this provides an interesting dilemma to the debate of pirate egalitarianism.

The established egalitarian world of piracy faces an interesting dilemma in Mary Read and Anne Bonny from piratical historical scholars. Gabriel Kuhn, for example, puts heavy emphasis on the male-dominated and hyper-masculine culture of the maritime ship. In his eyes, Read and Bonny's story does not show that piracy provided women a chance to "liberate themselves," for if the pirates had their druthers, "Read and Bonny would not have even been allowed on their ships."<sup>61</sup> Read and Bonny's membership of a pirate crew "did not indicate a subversion of patriarchal norms," as "they had to enter pirate society disguised as men," the maintenance of which kept them aboard.<sup>62</sup> To Kuhn, Read and Bonny "owe their achievement to *themselves* and not to pirate society."<sup>63</sup> Cross dressing becomes central to this view, and rather than a tale of pirate inclusion stretching even to women, Read and Bonny's story illustrates that any inclusion in piratical society

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<sup>60</sup> Appleby, *Women and English Piracy*, 217–18; Johnson, *A General History*, 156, 167, 173.

<sup>61</sup> Kuhn, 72.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

required masculine traits and qualities. Pirate egalitarianism could only stretch a modicum further than that of wider society of the time.

Marcus Rediker, the scholarly pirate celebrator, goes so far as to cite inclusion of women like Read and Bonny as indicative of the lengths of piratical progressivism. In his eyes, pirates “insisted upon an egalitarian, if unstable form of social organization,” as they “forged spontaneous alliances, refused to fight each other, swore to avenge injury to their own kind, and even retired to pirate communities.”<sup>64</sup> Rediker highlights that “their experience as free wage laborers and as members of an uncontrolled, freewheeling subculture gave pirates the perspective and occasion to fight back against brutal and unjust authority and to construct a new social order.”<sup>65</sup> At the center of piratical society then is the ability to choose, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> century Atlantic, only this “culture of masterless men” seized that choice for themselves.<sup>66</sup> As mentioned before, pirates, to Rediker, are a progressive force that rebelled against increasingly authoritarian regimes and cultures, given the ability to rebel by the natural freedom of the seafaring life. Mary Read and Anne Bonny simply seized upon this peculiar liberty. Rediker emphasizes, “Bonny and Read took part in the bold experiment beyond the reach of the traditional powers of family, state, and capital, one that was carried out by working men and, with their presence, at least a few women.”<sup>67</sup> These women seized male liberties for themselves and in doing so, became “a powerful symbol of unconventional

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<sup>64</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 86.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Rediker, *Villains*, 117.

womanhood.”<sup>68</sup> Read and Bonny’s maritime adventure becomes a tale of feminine empowerment. These women saw men seizing liberty by venturing to sea as pirates, free from the controls of oppressive society, and these women took the same tools and used them for their own female liberation. The progressive egalitarian nature of piratical society then allowed Read and Bonny to forge their own path despite the conventionally masculine nature of pirates.

When directly comparing these two views, the details of Read and Bonny’s story take on a new importance. The differences in Johnson’s *General History* and the *Tryals of John Rackam* seem to confirm both views at once. Johnson’s account that only a select few of the crew knew of Read and Bonny’s secret would confirm Kuhn’s notion that the masculine nature of piracy precludes women from piratical progressivism. Conversely, the witness accounts that the crew knew that Read and Bonny were women and cared not at all would endorse Rediker’s view that piracy and the anti-authoritarian nature could even allow women’s liberation in an intensely gendered time period. This illustrates the limits that these piratical sources entail.

Simply examining women pirates, then, cannot solve the question of the limits of pirate egalitarianism. The small numbers of women pirates cannot point to a single answer on egalitarianism at sea. Therefore, the wider role of women interacting with pirates must be examined. Mary Read and Anne Bonny famously interacted with pirates and become pirates themselves, but scores more women interacted with pirates on a much larger scale. Pirates had to visit ports and go ashore, and this brought them into contact with women who did not live at sea or fight alongside them. Pirates also took prisoners at

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<sup>68</sup> Rediker, *Villains*, 118.

sea and women found themselves captives of pirates. The question of pirate egalitarianism then rests with the treatment of far more women than the few famous pirate women.

In keeping with the duality of piratical portrayals, oftentimes descriptions of piratical encounters with women fall within the villainous pirate paradigm. Margarett Lincoln describes that “pirates’ mistreatment of women was represented as opportunistic and indiscriminate,” describing the multitudes of wives that Blackbeard would take visiting colonial towns as well as abductions of servant women by John Gow in the Orkney Islands that left them near death.<sup>69</sup> This treatment of lower class women appears extremely often. To pirates these women are commonly “playthings to be used and cast aside,” and numerous accounts of women being purchased by pirates before being gruesomely disposed of seem to confirm that notion.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, references to such treatment are too numerous to be discounted, and even accounts of regulations against rape and resulting punishments indicate lack of enforcement and a general acceptance.<sup>71</sup>

Disturbingly, contradicting accounts and reports of certain pirates indicate attempts to cover up instances of rape and violence toward higher status women with romanticized accounts. One instance is the previously mentioned account of the English pirate Henry Avery capturing a ship of Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb that carried treasure as well as a princess and her attendants. Multiple treatments of this event credit this as a great victory for Avery and describe how Avery honorably took the princess as his wife

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<sup>69</sup> Lincoln, 190–91

<sup>70</sup> Kuhn, 71, 73.

<sup>71</sup> Benerson Little, *The Sea Rover’s Practice: Pirate Tactics and Techniques, 1630–1730* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 202–3.



and forced his men to marry her attendants if they intended to “enjoy their prize.”<sup>72</sup>

Opposed to these treatments published in popular publications, firsthand accounts describe how the pirates “raped the women on board, some of whom committed suicide rather than submit to such a fate,” and later any surviving woman was not released with the rest of the captives.<sup>73</sup> On one hand, this reflects a wider trend in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries of rape and violence involving lower class women often being ignored or lightly punished.<sup>74</sup> On another level, even if there were not already plenty of sources describing violence by pirates against women, there would be cause to argue that further violence had been hidden in the records. Clearly pirate egalitarianism did not extend to captive women or most women encountered at sea. Violence against women by pirates was extremely common and often accepted, just as much of the violence at sea was accepted by many historical scholars.

Provided with this record of violence against women, reexamining the accounts of Mary Read and Anne Bonny prompts a few questions. Read and Bonny were pregnant at their trial, and due to the frighteningly common occurrences of pirate rape, one might ask whether the two women were indeed victims of rape. Johnson’s account does not support this hypothesis, however. Johnson describes that Mary Read fell in love with a fellow pressganged sailor aboard Rackham’s ship, and at her trial, “She declared she had never committed Adultery or Fornication with any Man,” and described the sailor who she loved and fathered the child as “her Husband.”<sup>75</sup> Since Anne Bonny ended up as a pirate

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<sup>72</sup> Lincoln, 192.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 192–93.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 164.

due to her love for John Rackham in Johnson's account, it would also indicate that Rackham was the father of Bonny's child, but Johnson details even more about their relationship. Apparently, Anne Bonny had become pregnant at an earlier date by Rackham, and Rackham sent her to Cuba to give birth and recover before returning to the ship to continue her piratical career.<sup>76</sup> Johnson's account indicates that both women carried children from relationships of their choosing. While the questionable nature of Johnson's account has already been mentioned, there is an important caveat. As pointed out before, some chroniclers tended to fictionalize encounters with higher-class women to erase instances of rape while often ignoring the rape of lower class women. Mary Read and Anne Bonny were assuredly lower class women, and it is possible that Johnson or the sources from which he sourced their story fictionalized or removed any reference to rape. Indeed, contemporary records did tend to cover up occurrences of rape.<sup>77</sup> The possibility of fictionalizing or silencing of an instance of rape is indeed a possibility, but a key difference lies with Mary Read and Anne Bonny. All accounts of the two women highlight their capability of violence and fearsome natures. Many of the episodes quoted earlier show these two women as more capable pirates than some of their shipmates. This can be best summarized in the famous quote attributed to Anne Bonny speaking about John Rackham, "if he had fought like a Man, he need not have been hang'd like a Dog."<sup>78</sup> It is a complex question then surrounding the conditions of Read and Bonny's pregnancies. It seems that rape could have occurred, but most accounts of Read and

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<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 172.

<sup>77</sup> One such example of covering up of rape at sea can be found in Glynis Ridley, *The Discovery of Jeanne Baret*, (New York: Random House, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 173.

Bonny do not support this. This does show the difficulty in discovering the truth amidst romanticized accounts of piracy, and emphasizes the importance of questioning the dominant romantic view of pirates.

Mary Read and Anne Bonny successfully lived and thrived in pirate society, and achieved fame as two of the most famous women pirates. For them, piratical society with its penchant for flouting societal rules and new social order allowed them to transcend gender roles of the day. Though, as the limited known examples illustrate, piratical progressivism did not as a rule extend towards women. Rather, the extensive and commonplace violence towards and rape of women encountered by pirates shows a major issue with the depiction of piratical progressivism. As mentioned before, piratical progressivism did not extend to all and derived from violence, especially when pirate women were involved. However, women were not the only group who held a tenuous position with piratical progressivism.

People of color, similar to women, complicate notions of piratical progressivism. The Golden Age of piracy took place concurrently with the height of the African slave trade. Slave ships crisscrossed the Atlantic just as pirate ships sailed the Atlantic. These two groups undeniably came into contact, and these interactions provide an excellent opportunity to further examine the limits of piratical progressivism. In many of the sources such as Johnson's *General History*, references to people of color are sparse and brief. In Blackbeard's tale following the battle and his death, Johnson described that he "had posted a resolute Fellow, a Negroe, whom he had bred up, with a lighted Match, in

the Powder Room, with Commands to blow up, when he should give him Orders.”<sup>79</sup>

Apart from this mention, there is little to no description as to the make up of the crew or of the status of any people of color on the ship. In another source, this one a pamphlet describing a pirate trial rather than a history, there is a brief mention that one ship within the fleet of the pirate captain Stede Bonnet had a crew made up of “forty White men, and sixty Negroes.”<sup>80</sup> In this densely worded pamphlet, this is one of the few mentions of the makeup of the crew. With such brief details and mentions of people of color, a reader of the sources might be led to believe that these pirates, predominantly mentioned as hailing from England and nearby areas, are overwhelmingly white.

However, some historians maintain that pirates ships were incredibly diverse as a result of the progressive natures. Rediker cites many brief mentions in other historical records that indicate a large proportion of black pirates, including the two previously mentioned references. He admits that “a substantial minority of pirates had worked in the slave trade and had therefore been part of the machinery of enslavement and transportation,” but he emphasizes that “piracy clearly did not operate according to the black codes enacted and enforced in Atlantic slave societies.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Linebaugh and Rediker maintain that the reason the Atlantic nations did so much to stamp out piratical activities, ending the Golden Age of Piracy, “in order for the [unregulated slave trade] to flourish.”<sup>82</sup> Another scholar, Kenneth Kinkor also writes about the progressive nature of pirates with regards to race. Notably, he roughly calculates the number of black

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<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *A General History*, 85.

<sup>80</sup> “The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet,” in *British Piracy and the Golden Age*, vol. 2, ed. Joel H. Baer (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 376.

<sup>81</sup> Rediker, *Villains*, 53–56

<sup>82</sup> Linebaugh and Rediker, 170–71.

pirates amongst famous pirate crews, and claims that many crews had a large percentage of black pirates, even “no crew was described as all white,” and as a whole he believes that “25 to 30 percent of [pirates active between 1715 and 1726] were black.”<sup>83</sup> Kinkor also points out that some pirates viewed themselves as former slaves, and posits that pirates serve as another example of a maroon community, famous for their racial diversity.<sup>84</sup> By scouring through historical records and seizing upon small details and quotes, these scholars demonstrate that piratical progressivism absolutely extended to people of color. Their ideals of freedom and egalitarian democracy included free blacks and former slaves long before the nations at odds with pirates would extend such political power.

Not all historical scholars are so convinced, however. Many scholars point out examples of pirates complicit in the slave trade as well as simply treating slaves as part of the cargo similar to the mindset of the slave traders themselves. Arne Bialuschewski claims that the amount of freedom that black pirates enjoyed was typical of the maritime culture of the day, and people of color exercised a greater amount of freedom being on any ship.<sup>85</sup> Bialuschewski also points to records of pirates killing, torturing, or even simply throwing the slaves overboard and overall, “Plantation slaves never had a realistic chance to obtain any kind of freedom by joining a pirate gang.”<sup>86</sup> The few mentions of

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<sup>83</sup> Kenneth Kinkor, “Black Men under the Black Flag,” in *Bandits at Sea: A Pirate Reader*, ed. C. R. Pennell, 195–210 (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 200–201.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 201–202.

<sup>85</sup> Arne Bialuschewski, “Pirates, Black Sailors and Seafaring Slaves in the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1716–1726,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 45, 2 (2011): 144.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, 153.

black pirates in the primary sources do not change the fact that pirates did engage in the slave trade. Other historians echo this. Magrette Lincoln notes that pirate “treatment of captured cargoes of enslaved Africans was unpredictable rather than uniformly humane, and they might sell the Africans as soon as free them.”<sup>87</sup> While some pirate crews may have extended their egalitarian society to include people of color, it clearly was no guarantee. Gabriel Kuhn notes that “the prospect of an anti-racist pirate ship—arguably, the most resisting ship of them all—becomes tremendously exciting,” but overall Kuhn doubts the progressivism of pirates pertaining to people of color, pointing out that it is just as possible that some Africans aboard pirate ships were still enslaved, rather than full crewmen.<sup>88</sup> Kuhn sums up the question of race and piratical progressivism rather well saying, “no matter how subversive, how rebellious or how countercultural the buccaneers and pirates might have been, they were still part of a colonial enterprise of oppression, enslavement, and genocide,” and furthermore, “a history of genocide still haunts the Caribbean—and so does the buccaneers’ and pirates’ part in it.”<sup>89</sup>

While some records exist of black pirates and of pirates acting as anti-racist pioneers, piratical progressivism did not extend fully to people of color. People of color suffered from piratical violence and the freedom that pirates enjoyed. Despite depictions of the symbol of piratical freedom emphasizing freedom above all else, pirates still could not totally escape the prejudices of the day, and their often violent treatment of people of color, despite a small number of black pirates, shows the limit of their progressive natures.

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<sup>87</sup> Lincoln, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Kuhn, 65–69.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 71.

## Conclusion

The romantic symbol of piracy most likely is destined to stay. Since the Golden Age of piracy, pirates have often been depicted in a heroic manner that highlights select qualities of their society. Movies like *Captain Blood*, *Muppet Treasure Island*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* all show pirates as countercultural heroes, highlighting their egalitarian nature, their anti-imperial activities, and their lives of freedom. This freedom has a seductive quality. A life free from the rules of society, subject only to rules that the crew consents to and agrees upon, possesses a strong draw. Not only is this life characterized by freedom, but by adventure, seeing the world and going wherever the wind blows.

Some historical records depict pirates in a similar way. Pirates did in fact practice a certain form of democracy. Each man was entitled a voice in decision making and received a share of the loot. For men from lower class backgrounds especially, a pirate crew gave one freedom and power unequalled in any other nation. While this life could never last forever, piracy served as a tempting life.

However, history does not fully support the symbol of the romantic pirate. While many men enjoyed more freedom than they ever could on land, this freedom relied on constant violence, often against men of similar class. Pirates may have attacked imperial power structures and sabotaged the power of the privileged, there were plenty of common people who were caught in the crossfire. Citizens of cities sacked by pirates could lose their wealth, their homes, and routinely their lives. Piratical freedom gave them the ability to do whatever they wished, including murder of innocents who did not enjoy such freedom. Freedom based upon violence serves as a sort of cruel joke despite its allure.

Furthermore, piratical progressivism was still limited by prejudices of the day. Specifically, the freedom of pirates predominantly extended only to white men. There were a small number of women pirates, but these women serve as an exception rather than a rule. And when compared to the number of women who suffered violence at the hands of pirates, it is clear that women could not as a rule enjoy the freedom of piracy. Similarly, people of color could not always enjoy piratical freedom. Some were, in fact, able to join pirate crews and enjoy political power, but many more remained in the bonds of slavery or suffered from piratical violence. While pirates may have been progressive, they were not always as progressive as their depictions claim.

In *Muppets Treasure Island*, Long John Silver claimed “It’s how you look at buccaneers that makes them bad or good, and I see us as members of a noble brotherhood.”<sup>90</sup> For members of the noble brotherhood, pirates absolutely served as a positive force and seizing freedom for those who suffered in the imperial system, but it’s important to remember that this freedom also led to mass violence, especially towards women and people of color. Pirates may have been progressive, democratic, and egalitarian to varying degrees, but their inherent violence and maintenance of racist and sexist power structures must be acknowledged, especially in light of continual romanticization.

Importantly, while the progressive nature of pirates has a spotty record, European piracy reached its height during a time of great change. The advent of European Atlantic imperialism changed the world in innumerable ways spreading people, ideas, and violence much farther than previously was possible. Society changed at all levels and, in

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<sup>90</sup> *Muppet Treasure Island*.



some ways, entire systems and worlds were turned on their heads. In such times people are desperate for something to latch on to. Oftentimes people will latch onto whatever is the most consistent or reminiscent of the old ways. Pirates do not necessarily fall into this category, but from the instant their names became famous, people have embraced these pirates.

In the unpredictable times of early European imperialism why did people latch onto a group that embraces ideas that were not part of traditional society? Because they offered a way that, while different, would be an improvement in a radically new way. Pirates did engage in racist, sexist, and violent activities, but so did governments and those within the traditional power structure. When both paths or both sides of the issue engage in similar evils, why not embrace the group that practiced some new good? Pirates have persisted as celebrated figures because they emerged at an unpredictable time and promised a new way. This way was doomed at the time. Ensuring new freedoms for some required denying those freedoms to others, but the egalitarianism that pirates practiced to a limited degree would arise later and become central to later more lawful societies. Pirates are such a popular group to romanticize because in some ways they were ahead of their time. They were criminals but they embraced a form of social equity that later would become accepted and promoted. While the violence, racism, and sexism of pirates should be remembered as a central part of piracy that often is swept under the rug by romanticized depictions, pirates show that justice and the law are not always unified, and the celebration of freedom is not always as rosy as it appears.

### **Riding, Roping, Romanticization: Cowboys as Dangerous American Symbol**

Most nations or cultures have their heroes and national symbols and myths. America has many, but one especially notable one is the cowboy. In fact cowboys appear in almost every aspect of American culture. From novels to films to music to political speeches, the cowboy has often served as a symbol of the peculiar national image. Born out of the Westward expansion that many public figures have pointed to as the exceptional quality of America, cowboys are depicted as similarly exceptional. And it is not only from within that cowboys are used as symbols for America. Indeed, cowboys are often latched onto by non-Americans as a convenient shortcut to describe the nation as a whole.

Cowboys played a large role in the subjugation and Euroamerican settling of the Western United States. A field dominated by almost entirely men and inspired by the Mexican *vaqueros*, cowboys of many backgrounds and identities would watch over, round up, and drive herds of cattle from their grazing ranges to a railroad to sell on the market. Later cowboys worked ranches after the fencing-in of the west, and other cowboys worked wrangling and breaking wild horses that still roamed the West.

From somewhat humble origins as a migrant labor force, cowboys took on new life in popular culture, embodying the American West. Often conflated with other Western figures such as the outlaw, the lawman, the gunfighter, and the cavalryman, cowboy has become a catchall term for Western hero, often regardless of actual cowpunching, wrangling, and roping. With the familiar imagery of a Stetson hat, boots, spurs, Colt revolver, and mustang, the cowboy is immediately recognizable. This historically romanticized cowboy may never, in fact, interact with cattle. Rather this

Cowboy, almost always white, often spends his time chasing outlaws, getting into gunfights, fighting Indians, and romancing frontier women, only to ride off into the sunset.

As with any national symbol, the cowboy is vulnerable to distortion and misrepresentation, often for political purposes. Popular depictions of the American West have depicted cowboys in a variety of ways, emphasizing their self-sufficiency and masculinity. These depictions do silence important aspects of cowboy life, namely the diversity of the labor force and their labor itself. In ignoring these qualities of cowboys, a romanticized, inaccurate symbol is created that is often used in hypocritical ways by public figures from celebrities to politicians.

Because of their symbolic role in American culture, there is a basis of scholarship, often focusing on more obscure qualities of the cowboy, but my aim is to go beyond the scholarly record. Namely, I examine depictions of cowboys within popular culture with the same sort of lens and critical perspective that one analyzes primary sources with. By analyzing the narrative of films and songs, highlighting the silences and stressed points, and viewing them as products of their cultural moment, I create a standard symbolic cowboy that has survived and thrived in American popular culture. I compare this to cowboy accounts, including some in the form of paintings, and autobiographies to illustrate where in the historical record the particular distortions lie. While memory and memoir intrinsically possess distortions themselves, these sources paint a cohesive enough picture to facilitate the creation of a historical cowboy type. Comparing and contrasting the symbolic cowboy and the historical cowboy in the context of how cowboys are used, I emphasize the danger of historical romanticization of cowboys,

especially in the current political climate. There are other historical figures who undergo similar historical romanticization, and my wider project analyzes these figures as well.

### **Scholarly Perspectives**

The symbolic cowboy at the core of this analysis has a few consistent qualities through the many cultural depictions. Masculinity is an undeniable quality, with various sources choosing to emphasize the sexual aspect of this trait. Capability of violence in service of justice and decency similarly plays another dominant role in the cowboy symbol. Popular depictions of cowboys almost always focus on white cowboys as well. Often celebrating the uniquely American qualities of the Cowboy, the symbol then becomes indicative of wider American culture. Mythologizing cowboys serves to mythologize America as a whole, celebrating American exceptionalism with a particularly masculine focus. The rich scholarship surrounding cowboys often chooses to highlight an focus on specific particular aspects of cowboy life to subvert such qualities associated with the symbolic cowboy.

Masculinity is one of the dominant aspects of popular depictions, These popular works, songs and films alike, feature women as symbols of civilizing and proper society that a cowboy cannot engage with, or as prizes to win and toss aside as the cowboy pleases. The cowboy accounts highlighted later mention women only briefly and only in their interactions away from the range. Indeed Charlie Russell's paintings depict only Native American women out in the West, except for a few exceptions where the white women serve as a foil for the cowboys, again symbolizing civilization or at least distance

from the range.<sup>91</sup> Indeed this reflects the fact that cowboys lived in an almost entirely masculine world, and the symbol has simply extrapolated this to indicate cowboys as a masculine ideal.

Some scholars, Dee Garceau for one, interrogate this accepted fact and analyze the masculinity of cowboys as indeed complex and multifaceted. After the demise of open range cowboying, the archetypal cowboy life, Garceau notes that cattle ranching retained its masculine nature, even as women worked equal shares on Western ranches. Indeed even when women became involved in cattle work, often they were still referred to as “cowboy” and their female identity basically ignored.<sup>92</sup> A miniscule number of cases of women as cowboys on the range do exist however. Little Joe rode the range with other cowboys and in fact hid her sex from the other cowboys so well that they did not learn she was a woman until her death.<sup>93</sup>

In this way the masculinity of the cowboy is reinforced, and remains unquestioned. However, the further consequences of such a male dominated workforce provoke further questions. Garceau interrogates the record on “bunkies,” the practice cowboys working in pairs to guard their herd and often having long partnerships.

Investigating their mention in firsthand sources Garceau notes that the characterization of

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<sup>91</sup> Frederic G. Renner, *Charles M. Russell: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture in the Amon Carter Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 265, 270. The first illustration shows a white woman dressed in the style of the day passing by a cowboy and some Native Americans, demonstrating the vast divide and the second depicts a cowboy and a prostitute.

<sup>92</sup> Dee Garceau, “Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work,” in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, ed. Matthew Basso, Lauren McCall, and Dee Garceau, 149–168 (New York: Routledge, 2001), 151.

<sup>93</sup> Jim Clayton, Jim Hoy, and Jerald Underwood, *Vaqueros, Cowboys, and Buckaroos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 206.

these relationships often bears similarity to the “mixture of affection and annoyance, much like that between long-term married couples.”<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, Garceau investigates the sources, songs and traditional cowboy stories for homoeroticism, and finds barely any reference, only songs and stories depicting mistaken identities.<sup>95</sup> Overall, Garceau discovers not that cowboying held secret antimasculine tendencies, but rather that the masculinity of the cowboy life was not that of middle class respectability, as it included activities frowned upon by society, including relations with prostitutes.<sup>96</sup>

Why is cowboy masculinity so celebrated? One important aspect is the context in which cowboys arose. The mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century when cowboys were most active saw the US industrializing and as such, greater numbers of men began working in factories and other career paths that did not involve manual labor such as banking also became increasingly common and celebrated. This began a process of shifting what qualities were celebrated as the masculine ideal. Trepidation over this shift appears in writings from the end of the period of free cowboying, and Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous frontier thesis reflects this anxiety. Turner mainly argues that the US has been defined by the presence of a frontier, and the qualities he notes as uniquely American are typical of this classical form of masculinity:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Garceau, 155.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 156–58.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 159–60.

<sup>97</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *American Historical Society Annual Report for 1893* (1894): 199–227.

Turner expressed this thesis after the declaration that the frontier had closed, and in a way Turner is expressing concern that these qualities may not persist. Viewed within this context, cowboys become the ultimate symbol of the unique American male. If the frontier made America and cowboys require a frontier, then once the frontier closes, the cowboy, and by extension American masculinity finds itself without a source. This moment is key to the continual romanticization of cowboys. They existed at a key point in US history, and it allowed them to become the ultimate symbol of classic American masculinity.

Beyond these specifics of masculinity, when cowboys are taken as the American ideal, it includes celebration of that masculinity. This translates to a celebration of American masculinity that, by definition, precludes somewhere around half of the nation. Such glorification only leads to stricter enforcement of gender roles that limits and discriminates, which seems especially hypocritical in light of celebration of freedom of cowboys. These are aspects of the cowboy symbol that need to be interrogated and questioned, ones that translate from celebrating an American symbol as a tool of discrimination.

The relationship between cowboys and Native Americans also deserves examination. The childhood game of Cowboys and Indians though not as dominant or far reaching still survives, and reinforces the idea of a strong divide, an absence of connection. These two groups serve as opposites, and can allow no crossover. While the Macleod memoir already mentioned complicates this idea, it deserves further

interrogation. Indeed, cowboys, more the reality than the symbolism, have played a considerable role as a sometime positive force for Native Americans.

Peter Iverson studies this relationship at length, and highlights the interconnectedness of cowboys and Native Americans. Iverson notes that the relationship has a troubling beginning. Cowboys played a major role in the further dispossessing of Native Americans and were instrumental in securing the land of the West for white settlers, and even once the violence of the Indian Wars had subsided, “non-Indian cattlemen benefited from restriction of Native holdings and access to the dwindling acreage Indians still possessed.”<sup>98</sup> Furthermore “if they became farmers or ranchers, they were not good enough farmers or ranchers. There was no way they could become good enough. Their very persistence and adaptation threatened to deny future prosperity for others. They were, after all, seen as Indians, not cowboys.”<sup>99</sup> Men like Charlie Siringo and Nat Love had fought Native Americans in their time as cowboys, and the cattle ranchers whom they paved the way for continued their expropriation of Indian land. Cowboys were one instrument of Manifest Destiny, of subjugation and colonization. This aspect of cowboy culture is little acknowledged. These men were building America, and the Native Americans had already relinquished control of that land. A dangerous narrative to be sure, but one that persists still.

However Iverson further complicates this narrative by analyzing the place cattle ranching has had for Native American communities. Importantly,

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<sup>98</sup> Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys: Native Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 51.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.



On reservation after reservation in [the early 20<sup>th</sup> century], cattle ranching obviously represented the best chance for native communities to build a local economy and rebuild a society... The involvement in ranching had helped to bridge the transition from treaties and agreements and the early reservation days to the final years of an assimilationist era. They could be like white men and not be white men. They were finding new ways to remain Indians.<sup>100</sup>

Iverson notes that by adopting cattle ranching and, in a way, adopting the cowboy lifestyle, Native Americans were able to reassert themselves and forge new identities. Cowboys contributed to their decline, but adopting their ways could allow a fruitful path, and one that allowed a blend of cowboy and Native American culture to flourish. Despite the early divisive and destructive nature of cowboys, they can also in a way serve as a uniting influence, when Native Americans become cowboys themselves.

This complex, contentious relationship further illustrates the complexity and danger of cowboy mythologizing. By only celebrating only cowboy accomplishments and perpetuating the myth of the predominantly white cowboy, one celebrates the theft of Native American lands and allows no room for the diverse world of the cowboy. As an American icon, cowboys are naturally going to be intensely multifaceted and often contradictory. If cowboys are to be celebrated and mythologized and symbolized, it should be with warts and all, with all qualities present, but that is simply not how they have been used and portrayed.

### **Popular Depiction**

The following depictions depict cowboys in myriad ways, and there are innumerable more sources that also depict cowboys. It would be impossible to analyze each and every cowboy depiction, but the ones that follow each emphasize different

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<sup>100</sup> Iverson, 84.

aspects of the cowboy symbol. Popular music has many examples of songs featuring cowboys, from a surprising number of genres. Country music regularly features cowboys, and much of country music culture comes from emulating or interpreting cowboy culture. Other genres such as rock music use cowboys in lyrics as well. The nature of cowboys as American symbol leads them to appear in all aspects of American culture.

The aptly named “Cowboy Song” by Thin Lizzy released in 1976 presents an interesting aspect, as the songwriter grew up in Ireland, far from the American West. Phil Lynott, the songwriter, bassist, and singer for Thin Lizzy, creates an evocative picture of the cowboy life, including many mentions to rodeos as well as the trail. He sings, “I am just a cowboy lonesome on the trail/A starry night, campfire light/The coyote call, the howling winds wail/So I ride out to the old sundown.”<sup>101</sup> Lynott chooses a few choice images that convey the classic image of the cowboy life. The solitude of a trail with only coyotes for company exposed to the elements, all of these images easily evoke a classic picture of the cowboy. Similarly, Lynott sings of “busting broncs for the rodeo” repeatedly.<sup>102</sup> Not only does Lynott bring to mind the classic image of the cowboy in their heyday, he refers to the continuing presence of cowboys today in the form of rodeos. One would not necessarily expect a song by an Irish rock band from the 70s to accurately depict the cowboy life, and the song makes no attempt to, rather choosing to use a series of evocative images to create a feeling or picture of cowboy life.

Importantly, this song serves as but one small example of the way that cowboys do not symbolize America as a nation solely within the United States. The band Thin

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<sup>101</sup> Thin Lizzy, “Cowboy Song,” *Jailbreak*, LP, Mercury Records, 1976.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Lizzy was already moving across cultures, taking American rock music and putting their own twist upon the genre. By singing a song about the cowboy life, the band further utilized American images and symbols, and this outsider's perspective shows just how the central place cowboys enjoy. If a non-American wishes to conjure up images of America with all the associated qualities, what better way than by evoking the cowboy? This outside perspective that highlights use of the cowboy as a symbol emphasizes just how ubiquitous cowboys are. This is not the single example of such a strategy and cowboys are often used in such a symbolic way. Not all songs remain so nonspecific however.

One might expect a country song like Jerry Jeff Walker's "Night Rider's Lament" to portray a more faithful version of the American West, and the narrative of the song does present important aspects of the cowboy mythos. The song tells of a cowboy, one "on the graveyard shift midnight 'til dawn," who reads a letter from a friend in his hometown who chastises him and asks a series of questions, "Why do you ride for your money? Why do you rope for short pay? You ain't getting nowhere and you're losing your share. Oh you must have gone crazy out there." He continues, saying how he ran into Jenny, assumedly an old flame of the cowboy, whom he describes as "married and has a good life," before continuing the chastising, "You sure missed the track when you never come back. She's a perfect professional's wife," who asks the same series of questions as before. These same exact questions are repeated towards the end of the song by another cowboy who works with the Night Rider, named Billy, this time about the folks back in town, "Now why do they ride for their money? Tell me why do they rope for short pay? They ain't gettin' nowhere and they're losing their share. Son they all must

be crazy out there.” A verse that’s repeated twice in the song also describes all that the folks back home haven’t experienced: “They’ve never seen the northern lights. They never seen a hawk on the wing. They never seen the spring hit the Great Divide. No, they’ve never heard old camp cookie sing.”<sup>103</sup>

Packing far more detail than Thin Lizzy, Jerry Jeff Walker describes the great culture divide of the cowboy and the hometown crowd. The city people can never fathom why the cowboy seemingly give up on any form of stability or surety, rely on a paycheck that will only come as long as there’s roping and riding to do. It’s pointless, and there can be no long term plan. On the opposite side, the cowboys cannot understand why anyone would subject themselves to the pressures of city life. The rat race, some quiet job as a clerk or similarly unstrenuous city work, and the pressures of civilized society are really no different than the cowboy life, just with metaphorical roping or riding. City life means making money for other folks while waiting for their due while the cowboy life earns every dollar with hard work and no bureaucracy. Even more than money, the cowboy life offers things that no city can. The aurora, nature still wild, and scenes of great beauty can all enrich a man more than any paycheck could, not to mention the camaraderie and the relationships, exemplified by the song of the cook. Each side cannot understand the other’s motivations. One desires stability, the other freedom. Walker knows how many yearn to be cowboys, and by presenting clearly which qualities cowboys and noncowboys latch onto, the cowboy life is clearly the one of adventure and unpredictability. To Walker that’s the whole appeal of cowboys. The freedom of cowboys is most important in this song. This song makes no bones about the life of a cowboy being wage labor on

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<sup>103</sup> Jerry Jeff Walker, “Night Rider’s Lament,” *Ridin’ High*, LP. 1975.

shaky ground, but rather that's one of the qualities that is so central to the life and should be celebrated.

Indeed, such freedom and more is celebrated in another song about cowboys, Toby Keith's "Should've Been a Cowboy." Rather than telling the story of a cowboy in a slice of life fashion as "Night Rider's Lament" does, this song comes from the point of view of a man thinking about how great the cowboy is. The chorus sums it up well: "I should've been a cowboy. I should've learned to rope and ride. Wearing my six-shooter riding my pony on a cattle drive. Stealing the young girl's hearts, just like Gene and Roy. Singing those campfire songs, I should've been a cowboy," referring to famous singing cowboy Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. The song also references the long running Western television show *Gunsmoke*, detailing how "ole Marshall Dillon" and Miss Kitty would "never tied the knot. His heart wasn't in it. He stole a kiss as he rode away. He never hung his hat up at Kitty's place." Other aspects of the cowboy life Keith yearns for include having "a sidekick with a funny name," "chasing Jesse James," "riding shotgun for the Texas Rangers," and heading out west where "California's full of whisky, women, and gold."<sup>104</sup> The message of the song is only enhanced by the music video that alternates between Toby Keith playing with his band in a barn with sepia tinged footage of him as a cowboy riding a horse and hunting outlaws.

Toby Keith takes a more conventional, romanticized look at cowboys in the song. One of the major qualities of the cowboy that Keith highlights is masculinity. Cowboys are constantly stealing hearts and that is even what drives them off to a place like California: available women. But importantly, the cowboy is not looking for a steady

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<sup>104</sup> Toby Keith, "Should've Been a Cowboy," *Toby Keith*, CD, 1993.

relationship, because cowboys cannot settle down, they must be on the move, free to roam and range. Again the freedom of a cowboy remains central to the symbol of the cowboy, though now it includes sexual freedom. Furthermore, Keith attributes to cowboys the duties and activities of the Western lawman, hunting outlaws and facing near constant danger. This conflation appears often in depictions of cowboys, and it highlights the need to point out what the actual job of a cowboy was. Surprisingly, Toby Keith does reference this with descriptions of roping and riding the range. The mention of a “sidekick with a funny name” does add a new level to the cowboy symbol. Alluding to the combination of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, the lyric reinforces the idea of the white cowboy. The cowboy’s sidekick has the “funny name” not the cowboy. In the narrative of the West, where white cowboys tamed a wild landscape, the Native Americans can serve as sidekicks, but little more. In a song that celebrates the lasting impact of cowboys, what the song chooses to celebrate, including the masculinity and sexual freedom, duties not actually held by cowboys, and a dominantly white culture, contributes to less savory aspects of the symbol of the cowboy.

“The Last Cowboy Song” provides another similarly conventional romantic depiction of cowboys with common yet troubling qualities. Originally written by Ed Bruce, but famously performed by the country supergroup the Highwaymen, this song tells of the history of the cowboy and its sad end. The chorus, that begins and ends the song not to mention being repeated throughout, gets straight to the point of the end of cowboying: “This is the last cowboy song/The end of a hundred year waltz/The voices sound sad as they’re singing along/Another piece of America’s lost.” The song juxtaposes the current state of what passes for cowboys with the proud history,

beginning: “He rides the feed lots, clerks in the markets/On weekends sellin’ tobacco and beer./And his dreams of tomorrow, surrounded by fences/But he’ll dream tonight of when fences weren’t here.” The fences are so key to the cowboy story. They signal the end, and only when they are gone can cowboys persist. The next verse takes a notable approach to placing the cowboy within American history, “He blazed the trail with Lewis and Clark/And eyeball to eyeball, old Wyatt backed down./He stood shoulder to shoulder with Travis in Texas/And rode with the Seventh when Custer went down. The song also mentions the role of artists, writers, and musicians in preserving the cowboy in culture, namely Remington, Louis L’Amour, and the members of the Highwaymen themselves: Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson. The most tragic verse describes the lack of recognition for the Chisholm trail, replaced by big rigs, and letting the memory of Jesse Chisholm die: “They roll by his markings and don’t even notice/Like living and dying was all that he did.”<sup>105</sup>

This song tells a very particular cowboy story. The true tragedy is this part of America is gone. Cowboying itself becomes the greatest pursuit an American could engage in, with all the associations of toughness and self sufficiency. Importantly, cowboying becomes associated with certain historical moments. Cowboys and Lewis and Clark explored the West for Euroamericans. Cowboys faced down Wyatt Earp, combining cowboys with the outlaws of the day. Cowboys sacrificed themselves in defense of Texas against Mexico with Colonel Travis at the Alamo. And finally cowboys died beside Custer fighting the Native Americans of the West. The cowboy of this song then, is notably and exclusively white. The cowboy expanded the US and fought those

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<sup>105</sup> The Highwaymen, “The Last Cowboy Song,” *Highwayman*, LP, 1986.

who stood in the way. This likening of cowboy and frontiersmen/soldier appears often and has become a central part of why cowboys are central to American narratives. Importantly this song describes little about actual cowboying. Referencing the Chisholm trail and fences captures an infinitesimally small part of what cowboys actually did. The cowboy of “The Last Cowboy Song” is not a historical cowboy, but rather the most dangerous version of the cowboy symbol. The white frontiersman celebrated for subjugating the West is a far cry from the historical cowboys. Cowboys absolutely contributed to Western subjugation, but ignoring all other aspects of the cowboy life is particularly dangerous. Importantly the fame of the singers of this song make it even more dangerous. All four artists who make up the supergroup are among the most famous and celebrated country artists, and given their fame, this song can spread a troubling message quite far. This song epitomizes the dangerous cowboy symbol.

One cannot speak of the symbol of the cowboy and their depiction in popular culture without addressing the cowboy presence in film. John Wayne, for example, serves as the prototypical cowboy for many, and his long career in Western movies made him a household name. While it would be disingenuous to say that John Wayne always played a cowboy, his Western roles always included qualities of the cowboy. In some of his, *Red River* and *The Cowboys* for example, John Wayne plays it straight. Both films feature cattle drives as the central plot, and to varying degrees depict cowboy activities somewhat faithfully. While these are remembered by Western enthusiasts, other John Wayne films cemented his image more strongly that did not explicitly depict cowboy life, but contribute to the popular imagination of cowboys.



*The Searchers* is regarded by many as one of the finest Westerns and has influenced innumerable filmmakers. For example, the American Film Institute ranked *The Searchers* as the best example of the Western, and when ranking the greatest American films, AFI ranked it first 96<sup>th</sup> and then the 12<sup>th</sup> greatest American film of all time.<sup>106</sup> With such a dominant place in American cinema beyond even the Western genre, *The Searchers* serves as one of John Wayne's definitive roles. His character, Ethan Edwards, is not explicitly a cowboy. Instead he is a former Confederate cavalryman who spends years searching for his niece kidnapped by a war chief, with only a passing mention to cattle he inherited from his murdered kin. He spends the duration of the film riding a horse in a Stetson and bib shirt with a Colt revolver on his hip, nearly visually identical to his cowboy roles. While this does not explicitly add to the cowboy symbol, it does contribute to John Wayne's image as cowboy icon, and John Wayne's singular influence on the popular conception of cowboys cannot be denied. No matter what film, from *Stagecoach* (1939) to *The Shootist* (1976), if John Wayne rides a horse, wears a hat, and totes his Winchester, many Americans view him as a cowboy without question.

There are plenty more Western movies to be sure. The Western was a dominant genre for over 30 years of American cinema, but it is important to note how few of these films actually deal with cowboying. Many beloved Westerns such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Shane* (1953) may have bold men riding horses toting six guns, but cowboys they are not. Even Westerns that do have prominent cowboy characters such as *The Big Country* (1958) or *Monte Walsh* (1970) do not focus on the

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<sup>106</sup> American Film Institute, <http://www.afi.com/10top10/>, <https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/53577>

cowboy life. They insert violent conflicts, rivalries, or love stories that all ensure that the film does not focus on individuals sitting on a hill in the middle of the night looking over a herd of cattle. Rather than attempting to depict accurately the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Western US, these westerns instead have more to say about the state of masculinity or politics now that industrialization, modernization, and urbanization have come to pass. The cowboys are not historical figures but a symbol of what has past. Therefore, the actual cowboys do not matter, but what they represent. With that in mind, taking John Wayne as the ultimate symbolic cowboy strongly captures the relationship between Western films and the symbol of the cowboy. Wayne's qualities of self-sufficiency, hypermasculinity, and penchant for violence, as well as the combative nature of white cowboys or cavalrymen and Native Americans precluding any notion of Native Americans as cowboys, become the defining cowboy qualities.

### **The Historical Cowboy**

Lying somewhere between popular and primary source, the paintings of Western artist Charles M. Russell serve as an intriguing source for the cowboy symbol. Russell spent eleven years in Montana as a cowhand, spending a great deal of his time drawing and sketching, and after giving up cowboying in 1891, he honed his craft and painted scenes both from his memories and imagined memories of his time in the West.<sup>107</sup> Rarely painting only landscapes, most of Russell's paintings show cowboys, wildlife, or Native Americans, and he continued painting these into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, long after many of the sights and scenes he painted would have vanished. One painting of his, *Bronc in Cow Camp* from 1897, depicts a cowboy on an ornery horse kicking over the cooks

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<sup>107</sup> Renner, 20–23.

implements during breakfast. One cowboy stands laughing while the cook threatens with a shovel and another cowboy has dropped his breakfast startled. The camp depicted has all the standard fixings, a herd of horses in the background, the chuck wagon, tents, saddles, and a scenic natural backdrop. Russell painted such a scene multiple times, each a little different, but all featuring at the center the bronco ruining the cook's setup.<sup>108</sup> A moment of excitement in the camp, the painting depicts an overall jovial scene. It's not hard to imagine someone viewing the painting and finding themselves full of desire to go out West to join these rugged men.

Another painting, *The Broken Rope* from 1904, shows a more dangerous scene. A cowboy has tried to rope a bull, but the rope has snapped and his horse has fallen. The painting shows the bull knocking the horse and rider down while two more cowboys rush to help, one dismounting and the other readying his revolver. Importantly, Russell included authentic details that a cowboy worth his salt could identify, including *tapaderos* that would only be worn by a Texas cowboy and "woolies" or angora chaps that were a common sight in Montana, as Frederic Renner points out.<sup>109</sup> This painting shows the danger that lurked within the work of a cowboy and dramatizes the work in an honest way. The painting also demonstrates well that Russell had experience with cowboys and knew how to honestly depict the lifestyle.

Indeed, his painting *In Without Knocking* from 1909 illustrates an incident that cowboys he worked with in 1881 described to him when he was working as a "nighthawk," watching the horses through the night. The painting shows five cowboys

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<sup>108</sup> Renner, 133.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

rushing through the streets of a simple Western town, Stanford, MT, and heading for a bar. One cowboy has already ridden his horse halfway in through the door while another's horse has tripped on the porch and the other three follow close behind, firing their pistols into the air. There is excitement and action, with the energy and commotion almost palpable. Renner points out that though this was painted over twenty six years after the episode in Stanford, "some of the participating cowboys swore the details in the painting were just as they had described them to Russell."<sup>110</sup> With a painting so explosive, the allure of the cowboy life is clearly strong, and it is telling that Russell did his best to stay true to the story of the event, tall tales involved notwithstanding. Russell painted the cowboys as he knew them, based on his own experiences and stories, but importantly, many of these paintings came years or decades after the incidents depicted. With the often unreliability of memory, one may not completely consider these paintings as reliable primary sources, and rather bear resemblance to popular accounts. But Russell lived the life and included authentic material and details within the worlds he created, and these paintings of cowboy life reveal valuable information about the historical reality of the cowboy while also including elements of the distortion and romance.

Cowboys on the whole did not leave behind substantial written accounts of their experiences. As they make their living in a mobile life on the range, the profession does not lend itself particularly well to documentary records. A considerable number of cowboys wrote autobiographies or memoirs, often years after retiring from the range. With these memoirs, one can get a good sense for the day to day life of a cowboy. Most of these accounts tell of riding the range and watching over cattle or horses, and often they

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<sup>110</sup> Renner, 243.

include a few colorful stories of adventure. Overall these accounts portray a different picture than many depictions of the cowboy.

Charlie Siringo gained fame for his multivolume autobiography, the first volume describing his experience as a cowboy. Chapters of Siringo's book often read as though they could be describing a John Wayne film. There's plenty of drama and violence, but also a fair amount of actual cattle work. Siringo worked in and around Texas including New Mexico, the Indian Territory (Oklahoma), and Arkansas, during the 1870s and 1880s. Starting with small ranch work he soon was participating in cattle drives. The stories Siringo chooses to highlight feature death defying stunts and plenty of adventure. He tells the story of one cattle drive in 1876, and one night after putting the herd of steers in the corral for the night in Gonzales, a thunder storm blew in and frightened the herd. Siringo slept just outside the corral in case, but he and the other cowboys were unable to distract the herd in time and, "the frightened herd went through the corral where I was sleeping. I had barely time to mount my pony, which saved me from being trampled to death. The corral was built of large live-oak logs and rails... The herd went through it as though it was built of paper."<sup>111</sup> Clearly the cowboy life was full of danger, and it took tough, capable men to handle these massive herds of cattle.

There are plenty descriptions of Siringo's cattle experiences, but Siringo also writes numerous episodes that sound more like something out of a Western film. Billy the Kid becomes a major figure, and Siringo takes it upon himself to write true accounts of many of the events in the outlaw's life, some even connected to Siringo. At one point

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<sup>111</sup> Charles Siringo, *A Lone Star Cowboy*. (Santa Fe: 1919), 41

while investigating a case of stolen cattle, a man named Pat Cohglin hired men to kill Siringo. While riding on a mule up a mountain,

the trail made a bend to the left, and to save time I cut across to strike it further up the mountain. This move, no doubt, saved my life, as assassins were laying for me a short distance ahead on the trail. Finally three shots were fired in quick succession, and my mule lunged forward...My pistol was hanging to the saddle-horn, but it was grabbed and pulled out of the scabbard as I went off the saddle. With the pistol ready for action I lay quiet for a few moments, thinking the would be assassins would show up.<sup>112</sup>

Siringo's life was clearly more eventful than the average cowboy. He faced death and conspiracies against his own life, though this probably has more to do with his later career in law enforcement. It does however illustrate a quality in common with the symbolic cowboy. There is a sort of acceptance and ubiquity of violence in the west. Another episode from Siringo's account notes, "two cowboys had a duel with pistols in the Bill Hudgins Pioneer Saloon. After the shooting was over Joe Fowler ran into the saloon and asked the bar-keeper who fired the shots He pointed to the cowboy lying in one corner of the saloon...Then Joe Fowler pulled his pistol and shot the wounded cowboy dead."<sup>113</sup> Gunfights and cowboys shooting at each other is awful common in Siringo's account.

Predictably, Native Americans also play a role in Siringo's narrative, but almost entirely as unfriendly if not hostile enemies. On the same cattle drive mentioned before, passing through Oklahoma, Siringo describes, "Large bands of mounted blanket Indians gave us much trouble. They were in the habit of riding into the camp when the cook was alone and eating all the cooked grub in sight. They also demanded the bosses to give

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<sup>112</sup> Siringo, 152.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 140.

them ‘who-haws,’ (steers) for beef, or they would stampede the herd at night.”<sup>114</sup> These sort of events only solidify the adversarial relationship between cowboys and Native Americans often depicted in popular culture. There is no overlap and conflict is inevitable between these two groups.

Overall Siringo’s life and autobiography match up surprisingly well with the symbol of the cowboy. His account is consistently punctuated by adventurous cattle drives as well as encounters with famous western figures, not to mention outlaws and bandits. He also encounters Native Americans, rarely on friendly terms, and furthermore violence never fades for long from the narrative. Clearly some aspects of the cowboy symbol were based on fact, but one does not expect it to compare so favorably. However, Siringo’s experience as a white cowboy who later became a ranger and a Pinkerton does emphasize that many of experiences occur with a different set of expectations. One would expect him to encounter more violence and outlaws, as a law enforcement official, and it would be unwise to conflate his experiences with the vast majority of cowboys.

While Siringo and his experiences line up well with popular depictions of cowboys, many more cowboys had different experiences such as Nat Love. Importantly, Nat Love was an black man, who was born an enslaved person but experienced emancipation and went west to become a cowboy. Love’s autobiography details his extraordinary life which, similar to Siringo, was not only marked by the adventure of the cowboy life, but also encounters with many famous and notorious Western figures. Love left his home state of Tennessee in 1869 around the age of fifteen and journeyed to Dodge City, Kansas. There he encountered many bands of cowboys, and after surprising

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<sup>114</sup> Siringo, 47.

some with his ability to ride ornery horses, he was offered a job and dubbed “Red River Dick,” the first of many nicknames he would receive in his time as a cowboy. Importantly, the band of Texas cowboys he joined up with included “several colored cowboys among them, and good ones too.”<sup>115</sup> Love tells many of his stories from the range, including adventurous stories more in line with western fiction. On his first trip to Texas with his new employer and band of cowboys, a band of “the old Victoria tribe of Indians” attacked and made off with horses and supplies and killed one of the cowboys, leaving the fourteen remaining cowboys with only six horses between them and forcing them to continue their trip on foot.<sup>116</sup> Most of the stories Love shares possess a similar dramatic flare, such as his account of a stampede that occurred during a cattle drive to Dodge City from the Texas panhandle.

Imagine, my dear reader, riding your horse at the top of his speed through torrents of rain and hail, and darkness so black that we could not see our horses heads, chasing an immense herd of maddened cattle which we could hear but could not see, except during the vivid flashes of lightning which furnished our only light...Late the next morning we had the herd rounded up thirty miles from where they started from the night before. On going back over the country to our camp of the night before, we saw the great danger we had been in during our made ride. There were holes, cliffs, gulleys, and big rocks scattered all around, some of the cliffs going down a sheer fifty feet or more...<sup>117</sup>

Such danger and adventure become commonplace to Love, and he peppers most accounts of round ups, cattle drives, and mustang hunts with descriptions of such danger. Love comes across in the narrative as an exceptional cowboy for many reasons including his

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<sup>115</sup> Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick" by Himself; a True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the "Wild and Woolly" West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author* (Los Angeles: 1907), 41.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–54.



memory for brands, essential for determining the owner of cattle during a round up, and his all around cowboy skills, shown by his victory in a roping contest in Deadwood, SD in 1876 that earned him the name “Deadwood Dick.”<sup>118</sup>

Apart from his experiences, Love also includes many musings on the cowboy life that serve to confirm many of the notions wrapped up in the symbol of the Cowboy. In speaking of his fellow cowboys, Love speaks of them highly,

a braver, truer set of men never lived than these wild sons of the plains whose home was in the saddle and their couch, mother earth, with the sky for a covering. They were always ready to share their blanket and their last ration with a less fortunate fellow companion and always assisted each other in the many trying situations that were continually coming up in a cowboy’s life.<sup>119</sup>

This highlights the intensely masculine culture of the cowboy, as only the toughest of American men could handle such strenuous work. This is a commonly highlighted aspect of the cowboy symbol, and the primary accounts support this notion. Furthermore, Love describes the rough world of the west, “there was no law respected in this wild country, except the law of might and the persuasive qualities of the 45 Colt pistol.”<sup>120</sup> No wonder cowboys were so tough as they had to bring law and order there on their own, based upon their own capacity for violence.<sup>121</sup> With such wild and tough descriptions one might wonder why any chose to become cowboys. Love touches upon this as well:

While the life was hard and in some ways exacting, yet it was free and wild and contained the elements of danger which my nature craved...I gloried in the danger, and the wild and free life of the plains, the new country I was continually traversing, and the many new scenes and incidents continually arising in the life of a rough rider.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Love, 47, 93.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>121</sup> A particularly violent incident amongst disagreeing cowboys is described on *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

This description again reasserts the notion of the wild and dangerous life that a cowboy could expect, and the type of rough and tumble men that the danger would attract. In this way Love's autobiography emphasizes many of the aspects of the cowboy life that popular depictions and uses of the cowboy symbol present unquestioningly.

Not all of Love's observations fit in as cleanly, however. While somewhat obvious, Love notes often that he encountered other nonwhite cowboys, and when one considers the diverse nature of the west owing to its status as a cultural crossroads, portrayals of the west ought to reflect that diversity. The fact that they do not and that white cowboys dominate depictions of cowboys highlight the often discriminatory and fabricated nature of the cowboy symbol. Throughout Love notes that employers often noted his talent and he had no trouble finding work.<sup>123</sup> Love also does not include descriptions of discrimination based on the color of his skin. It would be irresponsible to use this to assert that discrimination did not happen, and the fact that Love wrote this account many years after his time on the range further would allow negative or hurtful memories to fade. Nonetheless, this does indicate that a black cowboy could find plenty of work in the west, and it highlights the irresponsible depiction in popular culture that almost always includes solely or predominantly white cowboys. Interestingly, Love perspective often mirrors the dominantly white perspective, such as in descriptions of relations with Native Americans. Mentions of "Indian thieves" and violent encounters appear often, and Love intriguingly mentions that following news of Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn, "it is safe to say not one of us would have hesitated a moment in taking

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<sup>123</sup> Love, 47, 93, 127.

the trail in pursuit of the blood thirsty red skins had the opportunity offered.”<sup>124</sup>

Depictions of the West have not always faithfully shown the diverse nature of the land, as the popular accounts attest. Yet even accounts that clearly show the diversity such as Nat Love’s autobiography still can do a disservice to the nature of the West in depicting the Native Americans as only a violent obstacle to overcome, rather than as active players in the shaping of the west and indeed of the cowboy symbol.

Another firsthand account of the cowboy life comes from Malcolm Macleod’s personal account of his cowboy career. This account was written towards the end of Macleod’s life, addressed to his children, not intended for publication. Macleod’s career provides an interesting contrast to the lives of Siringo and Love. Firstly, while Siringo and Love were especially active from the period of 1865–1890 in the Texas and the Southwest, the height of Macleod’s career occurred from roughly 1888–1910 in the Northwest and Montana. Macleod was also of mixed descent, with a Scotch Irish father and a French-Canadian and Chippewa mother. His cowboy career also consistently brought him into contact with Native Americans, and he often worked breaking horses on and around the Flathead Reservation in Montana. He also includes as a brief aside in his account a description of Native American bison robes, war bonnets, and signaling techniques, which he prefaces saying “I don’t want ether of my Children to be ashamed of the Indian Blood.”<sup>125</sup> This account therefore provides a different picture of the West,

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<sup>124</sup> Love, 42, 43, 51, 95.

<sup>125</sup> Malcolm Macleod, *A Cowboy’s Life is Very Dangerous Work: The Autobiography of a Flathead Indian Reservation Cowboy, 1870-1944*, ed. Mary Adele Rogers and Robert Bigart (Pablo: Salish Kootenai College Press, 2016), 48–49.

one that includes Native Americans as active participants in the making of the cowboy life.

Macleod's account describes the many duties and adventures of a cowboy, that continued even past when one might expect the cowboy lifestyle to have ended. Macleod went on his first roundup in 1889, and immediately discovered the danger a cowboy faces. Macleod describes how of all the cowboys he worked with none called him by his name instead calling him Idaho, which matched the rest of the cowboys he rode with, known as "Arizonia, San Antone Kid, Kid Curry, Colarado Jack, Cheyene Jimmy...Fily up the creek, two Bellie, Kid Price, Chas Russell, the Famious Cowboy artist, Harmonica Pete, Kid Turnbull."<sup>126</sup> One incident Macleod mournfully recounts is when he "made Chums with a little Mexican, by the name of Montgomery," only for Montgomery to be bucked form a horse who disliked a bit, breaking his neck.<sup>127</sup> A tragic beginning to Macleod's cowboy career, this again emphasizes the danger of the cowboy life. Macleod also describes the role of a cowboy's revolver, a mainstay of cowboy depictions, "Thats one of resons that all Cowboys carried a 6 shooter. Sos you could Kill your Horse of he was dragging you with your first fast to the stirrup."<sup>128</sup> Macleod also mentions "If your Horse Shuld happen to fall you can ethier Kill your Horse or Kill a Steer and lay down along Side of the animal in the Opposite Derection from the way the cattle are comeing. When they come to this object, they will Jump clear over it, and in that way they wont be Tramping on you."<sup>129</sup> Even without the constant threat of violence that Siringo and Love

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<sup>126</sup> Macleod, 17. The same Russell whose paintings are cited earlier.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 18.

faced, a cowboy still always carried a pistol, often serving as more tool of the trade than weapon. Many of Macleod's experiences again reinforce aspects of the cowboy symbol. Macleod faced danger in his many roundups and drives, and the cowboys had to be tough or resourceful enough to survive.

Macleod did have many experiences that set him apart from Siringo and Love. For a number of years, Macleod worked for Charles Allard, who for a limited time toured his personal herd of bison as a sort of traveling Wild West show in the vein of Buffalo Bill. Indeed with Allard, Macleod travelled to the 1893 World's Fair, describing, "I was a daily Vistor to Bufflo Bill's wild west Show. I didnt think much of his cowboys, aful Poor Ropeing. There was a 1 leged Mexican that was the Best Rider he had. There Horses didnt do the Bucking like a wild Range Horse would."<sup>130</sup> Macleod did not only witness the Wild West show, he also rode in Allard's short lived show, riding bull bison both saddled and barebacked and one time escaping trampling by roping a calf to the ground and ducking in the split in the herd.<sup>131</sup> This marks Macleod apart, as in his own experiences he contributed to the mythologizing of the cowboy life, showing that even from the beginning the Cowboy has served as an important and popular symbol.

Macleod's experience highlights another important aspect of the cowboy life, namely the transient and unpredictable nature of cowboy work. While Macleod had a steady job with Allard from 1890 until Allard's death in 1897, Macleod spent much of his cowboy career wandering from employer to employer, short job to short job. After attempts at other trades, including bringing supplies to gold rushes that left him with no

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<sup>130</sup> Macleod, 22.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 28, picture on 27.

money, Macleod found himself back on the Flathead reservation, where “there was an Old Indian Women there that owned about 250 or 300 head of Horses and She had no one to look after them.”<sup>132</sup> A few years later he found himself in a similar fix, breaking horses near Winona, WA and then again when he was back in Montana near Palouse City breaking horses for another friend.<sup>133</sup> For most cowboys, pay was never assured and could only be had as long as there were cattle or horses to wrangle. Love emphasizes that a cowboy’s life was tough and not everyone would be cut out for it, and Macleod’s experiences show that it was not just physical danger but a life of want and no guarantees.

This emphasizes one of the key facts of the cowboy life that popular depictions often neglect, namely, cowboys as a migrant labor force. While popular depictions seize on the freedom and adventure of the cowboy life, the actual work of the cowboy rarely features. Cowboys are heroes, not workers. Love, Siringo, and Macleod all mention violent incidents, so the common popular conflation of cowboys with gunfighters and law enforcement has some basis. But the vast majority of the life of cowboys centered around wrangling, roping, and herding. While that may not make for overly exciting stories, it does a disservice to the cowboys to ignore how they made a living day to day. To reduce a diverse group of people who spent their lives traveling working for a little pay here and there to a bunch of white men spending their days fighting Indians and each other changes the entire narrative irresponsibly so.

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<sup>132</sup> Macleod, 33.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 38, 39.

Similarly, by expanding beyond simply a few personal memoirs, one can discover further aspects of cowboy life that other cowboys might have experienced. These experiences further complicate the accepted aspects of cowboy life, and bring forth an even more complex reality that must not be ignored.

### **The Use of the Cowboy**

Arguing and endlessly analyzing every detail of how cowboys are remembered and portrayed and used and mythologized might seem a pointless venture, but indeed the symbol of the Cowboy has concrete consequences that only highlight how important it is to differentiate the fact and the fiction. A speech by President Ronald Reagan shows just how far this symbol can go. The actor turned politician who once portrayed cowboys gave a speech at the opening of an exhibit on “The American Cowboy” at the Library of Congress in 1983. Tellingly Reagan declares outright, “Like [Western art], this exhibit can remind those of us who work or visit here what America is all about,” and “I think America's heart is on display here. This exhibit explores both the reality and the myth of the American West. And both are important. Here are more than the bits and pieces of a rough and gritty life, but the tangible remnants of a national legend.” Furthermore, “Integrity, morality, and democratic values are the resounding themes.” And finally, “as the exhibit travels from city to modern city, I hope it reinforces the glue of a very good society, born and bred in the wide open spaces.”<sup>134</sup>

This is but the opinion of one man, but that one man is President Reagan, a figure who still wields great influence thirty years after his presidency. To Reagan, the cowboy

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<sup>134</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Opening of "The American Cowboy" Exhibit at the Library of Congress." March 24, 1983. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41095>.

defines America and lies at the core of the national identity for America. He acknowledges the role of myth in the presentation, but still asserts that the values of the cowboy are the values of America. There is little nuance here. The cowboys define America as a nation, serve as a symbol of the national ethos.

Reagan also notes that by studying the cowboy, “we will better understand how our people see themselves and the hopes they have for America.”<sup>135</sup> That’s true. If mythologizing the cowboy and celebrating the symbol highlights what Americans wish to celebrate about America, there are choices to be made. If Americans celebrate the white cowboy, does that mean Americans celebrate America as a white nation? If Americans celebrate the hypermasculine cowboy, does that mean Americans celebrate America as a masculine nation and therefore that masculinity should be advanced above all else? If Americans celebrate the self-sufficient, unilaterally acting cowboy capable and willing to engage in violence, is it surprising that America continually intervenes with violence across the world, often with little regard for consequences or the opinions of the rest of the world?

### **Conclusion**

Cowboys, despite a complex, multicultural origin and complicated history, remain as one of the foremost of American symbols. Representing the history, the ideology, the character of the nation, cowboys have transcended their literal history to serve in a symbolic role. Naturally this involves extensive mythmaking and romanticization. Popular culture has played a special role in this process, with cowboy songs exemplifying what aspects of the cowboy life to be celebrated, and Western movies and films

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<sup>135</sup> Reagan, “Remarks.”



solidifying the image of the cowboy and choosing which aspects to emphasize. While historically accurate sources portray cowboys with more nuance, it is often difficult to differentiate fact from fiction, and each cowboy account often confirms and contradicts the fiction to varying degrees.

When such a symbol is held so close to the national psyche, intense interrogation is vital. Romanticization and fabrication allow such symbols to be manipulated and used to justify whatever the powers that be wish. Cowboys are no different. Depending on how distorted a view of cowboys is used, they can be used as symbols of violent subjugation or diverse culture shifting. Studying how they have been distorted can reveal what the motivations are of those who use the symbol, and can allow one to make more informed decisions as to whom one should listen to.

In our current political climate, it has become more important than ever to confront romanticization. With continual calls from certain sections of society for a return to the way things were, back to the good old days, romanticization, revision, and distortion happen constantly. But that romanticization erases parts of the past, and creates an imagined history that never existed. It would be foolish to condemn each and every popular depiction of cowboys that stray from historical fact in the slightest. However, it is important to be aware of the distortion. To realize that such depictions are colored more often by their own context, and should be taken as historical records. One must consciously consume, critically analyze. The cowboy is not the only figure with a distorted story for political gain, but the key is to look deeper and by comparing with the historical record and noting the discrepancies, political intention can be discovered hiding behind stories of riding and roping.

## **“I Like Baseball, Movies, Good Clothes, Fast Cars, Whisky, and You”:**

### **Robinhooding Depression-era Bank Robbers**

The 1929 stock market crash plunged the US into the Great Depression and, combined with already worsening conditions and prices, struck a particularly brutal blow to many farmers in the rural Midwest. While many in cities began to lose their jobs, farmers began to lose their homes. The failure of banks, combined with the predatory activities of those banks that remained, engendered in many a harsh and intense hatred of the banks that many felt stole their homes. Of course, these activities were indeed legal, all part of the agreement when taking a loan from the bank, but the legality of these actions were not the sticking point. They might have been legal but they were not just, not right. Justice and legality seemed to have diverged.

At the same time, a wave of colorful criminal characters burst into national attention and the banks of the nation suddenly became their victims. These bank robbers became the scourge of the middle of the country, from Minnesota to Texas and Ohio to Oklahoma. Armed with fast automobiles and submachine guns, these bank robbers distinguished themselves from the other famous gangsters of the day, and became something more. To many of the working class, these figures were striking a blow against the injustice and villainous powers that be that did nothing as so much of the country suffered. Sure, many of these figures appeared to truly only be in the bank robbing game for the money and the crime, but the public embraced many all the same.

These bank robbers such as Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, John Dillinger, and Charles Arthur “Pretty Boy” Floyd appeared at similar times and caught national

attention. These four figures achieved an even higher level of fame in the decades after their deaths, as popular culture seized upon their notoriety and with varying levels of romanticization, turned them into folk heroes on a nationwide scale. Other bank robbers of the day, such as Alvin Karpis, the Barker Gang, and “Baby Face” Nelson, all achieved fame in the 1930s, but they did not receive the romanticizing treatment later.

So why Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd? While there are similarities among all four figures with their backgrounds, exploits, and deaths, the facts of their lives never figured into their popularity. Rather, their notoriety allowed others to capitalize on their fame to romanticize or demonize them for whatever purpose. These bank robbers all joined the American outlaw tradition in line with famous Western legends such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid to become larger than life figures. Furthermore, the context that they appeared in is hugely important, as the time of want and confusion creates the ability for these characters to become so famous. Also, their lives of crime still achieved a level of freedom that was out of reach of most of their day. They answered to no one as long as they stayed ahead of the law, and in a way their lifestyle was the last gasp of an America that would not persist past the 1930s. Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger, and Pretty Boy Floyd all arose in a time of confusion of legality and justice to become famous outlaws that would eventually be latched onto in popular culture to become unconventional heroes and symbols of freedom that persist even now.

### **The American Outlaw**

Beyond simply history, the outlaw has taken a special place in American folklore, and the bank robbers of the Great Depression are but one manifestation of the outlaw.

Whenever outlaws are brought up, the most famous outlaw Robin Hood is sure to follow. Kent L. Steckmesser took on such a comparative analysis, tracing the common elements between the stories told of Billy the Kid and Jesse James and the ballad tradition of Robin Hood. He notes many common elements between the stories, but ultimately concludes that these stories belong strictly to folklore:

His concern for the poor, his exemplary character, his cleverness, his “betrayal” by a traitor are all aspects of legend rather than of history. The historical biographers aid in this folkloric process, perhaps unconsciously, by molding their heroes to fit the Robin Hood stereotype. Journalists also make significant contributions in the “Robinhooding” of American outlaws. But even without the assistance of biographers and journalists, the people will transform the facts of the outlaw biography into legend.<sup>136</sup>

Steckmesser finds that the elements of outlaw stories used to play up Robin Hood-like qualities often are influenced more by those who present the story who wish to see such a connection, and that there is little basis in reality for such in the historical record. While the effect of biographers, journalists, and the people repeating the story are key to the analysis of Depression-era bank robbers, it should not be ruled out that Robin Hood-like qualities indeed appear in reality for some bank robbers.

In a study more focused on the outlaws themselves, Richard E. Meyer created a list of qualities present in the American outlaw. Notably, “If, then, one acknowledges the fact that debunkery’s peculiar brand of tunnel vision is an unacceptable method by which to treat the matter of outlawry and its place in the American folk consciousness,” and he

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<sup>136</sup> Kent L. Steckmesser, "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 312 (1966): 354.

claims that one must accept the distortions as part of the story of these figures.<sup>137</sup> Meyer lays out twelve qualities for his classification system:

First, the American outlaw-hero is a “man of the people”; he is closely identified with the common people, and, as such, is generally seen to stand in opposition to certain established, oppressive economic, civil and legal systems peculiar to the American historical experience...

Second, the outlaw-hero’s first “crime”—the one that launches his career—is brought about through extreme provocation or persecution by agents of the oppressive system...

Third, the outlaw-hero steals from the rich and gives to the poor, in this and other ways functioning as one who serves to “right wrongs”...

Fourth, the outlaw-hero is good-natured, kind-hearted, and frequently pious...

Fifth, the outlaw-hero is characterized by the audacity, daring and sheer stupendousness of his exploits...

Sixth, the outlaw-hero frequently outwits and confounds his opponents through a variety of “trickster”-type tactics...

Seventh, during his career the outlaw-hero is helped, supported and admired by his people...

Eighth, the authorities are unable to catch the outlaw-hero through conventional means...

Ninth, the outlaw-hero’s death is brought on through a betrayal by a former confederate or friend...

Tenth, the outlaw-hero’s death provokes a great mourning on the part of his people...

Eleventh, the outlaw-hero often manages to “live on” in one or a number of ways...

Twelfth, the outlaw’s actions and deeds do not always provoke approval and admiration, but may upon occasion elicit everything from mildly stated criticisms and moral warnings to outright condemnation and refutation of any or all of the previous eleven elements.<sup>138</sup>

This exhaustive list covers the entire career of robbers, and while not all appear in each outlaw’s tale, many of these pop up repeatedly. While this categorization provides helpful tools for examination, sticking too closely would simply replicate Meyer’s work, and this analysis will attempt to go in a different direction.

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<sup>137</sup> Richard E. Meyer, "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17, no. 2/3 (1980): 96.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 97–111. Italics removed from original text.

Intriguingly, both Steckmesser and Meyer use Jesse James and Billy the Kid in their outlaw analysis, while Meyer also uses Sam Bass and Pretty Boy Floyd. Jesse James and Billy the Kid, in a way, constantly peer over the fence for any discussion of Depression-era bank robbers. The likes of John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Bonnie and Clyde all made their name as their own brand of outlaw, but they still exist in the shadow of the original and still, in some ways, most notorious American outlaws. The contexts, though, are different. Jesse James grew his fame as an ex-Confederate in the post-Civil War era, and Billy the Kid as a famous gunfighter in New Mexico. In addition to their place in the folklore of the American West, these two men have become the prototypical American outlaws that all following outlaws must measure themselves against. Sam Bass, a Texas icon, nearly joins them, but his reputation would never quite grow as strong outside of his home state. Nevertheless, outlaws in America are continually compared to these icons of the Wild West, and it serves as an interesting connection to a time long gone by the Great Depression that in scholarly circles, Dillinger, Floyd, Bonnie and Clyde to differing degrees stand alongside their Old West counterparts in the American memory.

More importantly, Meyer focuses on the exceptional nature of American outlaws in particular, but the celebration of outlaws stretches beyond national bounds. Indeed, the man who wrote the book on bandit studies, Eric Hobsbawm, held a special focus for social banditry and the celebration of outlaws outside of the domestic American context.<sup>139</sup> This shows that, while my analysis indeed does focus on the American context, specifically famous Depression-era bank robbers, one should not limit the

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<sup>139</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

consequences of this analysis to the 1930s American context, as this is but a single case study in a much larger field.

Another important caveat with regards to bank robbers is their relation to gangsters. To some this may be a pedantic, semantic division, but some key qualities differentiate the Depression-era bank robbers discussed in this analysis from the famous gangsters of the 1920s and 30s, such as Lucky Luciano, Al Capone, and Bugs Moran. As one scholar notes, “[Gangsters] were often from ethnic backgrounds, claimed as victims other gangsters, and were essentially businessmen who profited from vice and the corrupting of political officials.”<sup>140</sup> This ethnic difference may appear minimal, but there lies an important distinction here. Both bank robbers and gangsters certainly benefitted from a certain level of, for lack of a better term, tribalism. Gangsters were celebrated by the ethnic urban enclaves they served for being symbols of success and serving said enclaves. Bank robbers, to a certain extent, appealed and served in a similar way, but an important difference lies in their identity. Floyd, Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde were all lower class white Americans. Their ancestors came from somewhere, but this had little identifying control over them. They did not appeal to certain ethnic enclaves but rather to whole swaths of lower class American white society. They appealed to farmers who lost their property to banks as a result of the Depression. They appealed to the jobless as they needed no boss or employer. They grew up without much opportunity, and by turning to crime, they made their own way.

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<sup>140</sup> Paul Kooistra, “Criminals as Heroes: Linking Symbol to Structure,” *Symbolic Interaction* 13 no. 2 (Fall 1990): 234n1.

This parallels the common arc of the famous gangsters, but bank robbers specifically fought the system and were at odds with the capitalistic norms of the day. Gangsters, for all their anti-establishment reputation, still operated within the system, buying and selling, whether through money laundering or protection rackets, each involved exchange of goods and services and money, with extortion as an added extra. This still mirrors the American dream: the self made man, the entrepreneur. The bank robbers took an alternate path. They rebelled against the system, the banks, the law. They made money on their own terms, with their own blood and sweat. There certainly are plenty of parallels and a decent number of similarities between the gangsters and the bank robbers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the most important difference is the self-reliance and self-applied freedom obtained by bank robbers.

### **Bonnie and Clyde**

Unlike Pretty Boy Floyd or John Dillinger, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker built a reputation of violence that overshadowed their careers as bank robbers. Their exploits were often reported on in the newspapers, and the duo was making national news in mid-1933. While some of these articles contain inaccuracies, they show how the public at large would have viewed the notorious couple and the inaccuracies would have become part of the public image.

The respective origins of the couple speak volumes of what drove these two, among others considering the similarities to become bank robbers. Clyde Barrow was the poor, uneducated son of tenant farmers who, after moving to Dallas, got involved in various petty crimes before meeting Bonnie Parker, a waitress who often switched jobs,



at a party in January of 1930.<sup>141</sup> They were drawn to each other, but Clyde ended up in prison later that year. He was later transferred to Eastham State Prison Farm, where he was beaten and raped by another inmate until Clyde beat the man to death with a lead pipe in October 1931.<sup>142</sup> Clyde and Bonnie reunited in February 1932, and their famous crime spree would then get under way.<sup>143</sup>

At the time of their deaths in 1934, at least 12 murders were attributed to Bonnie and Clyde and the rest of the Barrow Gang, including various friends and accomplices and, famously, Clyde's brother. In a sort of retrospective published after their deaths, they were blamed for the murders of nine members of law enforcement and three others, two shop keepers and the owner of a car Bonnie and Clyde stole.<sup>144</sup> Some of these incidents took place during robberies while others occurred seemingly unprovoked. All the murders are attributed to Clyde, with an emphasis on the savagery and ease with which he committed such heinous acts. The newspaper article that details the crimes of the duo pushes a narrative, openly stating, "Clyde Barrow was a snake-eyed murderer who killed without giving his victims a chance to draw. He was slight, altogether unheroic in physical appearance," continuing with a description of Bonnie, "Bonnie Parker was a fit companion for him. She was a hard-faced, sharp-mouthed woman..."<sup>145</sup>

While the media clearly had a denunciatory agenda for these two, many of their exploits also do not reveal a misunderstood couple with a message for the powers that be, but

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<sup>141</sup> Jeff Guinn, *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 29–32, 52–53.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 75–76.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>144</sup> "Barrow's Killings Date from Parole," *New York Times* (hereafter abbreviated *NYT*), May 24, 1934.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

instead a criminal gang often pushed to desperation. In one of their earliest appearance in national news, Bonnie and Clyde, though Bonnie remained nameless, threatened and injured a farmer and kidnapped and tied police officers to a tree with barb wire, all because Clyde rolled the car and injured Bonnie.<sup>146</sup> Later that same year, after a shootout escape with police, the duo and the rest of their gang were surrounded and nearly killed. Both Bonnie and Clyde suffered bullet wounds, and Clyde's brother was captured before dying shortly after, though his wife survived.<sup>147</sup> In both of these incidents, the criminals are referred to as "the Barrow Gang," with Clyde and his brother being the major players and Bonnie remaining the nameless woman companion. These national news articles do not convey a sense of romantic adventure, but rather desperate criminals running from one hiding place to another. There is not even any special importance attached to the mysterious woman companion. These early accounts treat the couple as simply another gang of criminals at large in the countryside, and a particularly dangerous one given their penchant for violence.

However, a newspaper got ahold of pictures left behind at one of the gang's hideouts, and Bonnie became just as famous as Clyde.<sup>148</sup> The most famous of these pictures shows Bonnie with leg up on the bumper of the car with a cigar in her mouth and revolver in her hand, creating her image as the cigar smoking companion. Later reports on the duo named Bonnie explicitly, with a consistent epithet referencing her cigar smoking, gun toting image. One of Bonnie and Clyde's famous later acts involved a prison break from the Eastham State Prison Farm in Texas, the same prison Clyde had

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<sup>146</sup> AP, "2 Texas Desperadoes Kidnap Two Officers," *NYT*, June 12, 1933

<sup>147</sup> AP, "Iowa Machine Guns Rout Barrow Gang," *NYT*, July 25, 1933.

<sup>148</sup> Guinn, 173–74. Pictures 14&15 in center inset.

served time in. They planted guns for some old associates to find, and once the shooting started, Bonnie and Clyde appeared, guns blazing, and driving off with five prisoners, leaving wounded prison guards.<sup>149</sup> Here the duo do not so much seem desperate, and this incident depicts them closer to the honorable criminal sort of archetype. Notably, Bonnie Parker is described as the “two gun, cigar-smoking woman companion of Barrow on his three year career of major crime.”<sup>150</sup> A few months later, the couple made the news again, this time after their car became stuck in some mud, leading to their presence being reported to the police, but when the police arrived, Clyde and an accomplice shot and killed one officer and wounded another, before escaping, and again, Bonnie was described as “Barrow’s cigar-smoking woman accomplice.”<sup>151</sup> This story certainly returns to the picture of the desperate criminals on the run. But it is important that in both stories are explicit mentions of Bonnie Parker. Previously she was some anonymous woman, but now she is named the famous cigar smoking gunwoman. No longer would the public hear of Clyde and a woman, now they would hear of Bonnie and Clyde. But that was not the narrative from beginning at all, the idea and the remembered Bonnie and Clyde did not arise until their robbery spree had already climaxed, only a few months before their deaths.

As Bonnie and Clyde gained fame due to their violent exploits, so too would their death become famous for its brutality. On May 23, 1934, the duo drove into an ambush at excessive speed, and when prompted to stop, reached for guns before being shot by

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<sup>149</sup> AP, “5 Convicts Freed by Clyde Barrow,” *NYT*, Jan. 17, 1934.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> AP, “Barrow Kills Man, Kidnaps Another,” *NYT*, April 7, 1934.

multiple officers who continued shooting after the car had crashed.<sup>152</sup> Reportedly, 167 bullets hit the car and 50 struck Bonnie and Clyde, some of which removed a few of Bonnie's fingers and broke Clyde's glasses. The man who led the ambush, retired Texas Ranger Frank Hamer, said, "I hate to bust a cap on a woman, especially when she was sitting down. However if it hadn't been her, it would have been us."<sup>153</sup> Hamer was later quoted as saying, "We shot the devil out of them."<sup>154</sup> Clearly the end of Bonnie and Clyde was brutal, bloody, and violent. The overwhelming force used by law enforcement shows to a certain extent their expectation for violence from Bonnie and Clyde, and one would need a healthy reputation for violence to earn 50 bullet wounds. Writings about the final moments of the couple contain no empathy and depict the event as a heroic act bringing about the end of such criminals.

Newspaper records predictably depicted Bonnie and Clyde as violent criminals, and their death was a celebratory event. Importantly, opposed to the large turnout at Pretty Boy Floyd's funeral as will be discussed later, there is an absence of contemporary popular culture to indicate a more sympathetic view of Bonnie and Clyde at the time. However, unlike the other bank robbers, Bonnie Parker wrote poems, and one, left to her mother before Bonnie's death, describes Bonnie and Clyde's life.<sup>155</sup> Titled "The End of the Line" or sometimes "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde," this poem tells a familiar story of the outlaw life, but this time from the outlaw herself. Beginning with a reference to

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<sup>152</sup> "Barrow and Woman are Slain by Police in Louisiana Trap," *NYT*, May 24, 1934.

<sup>153</sup> AP, "50 Bullets Hit Pair," *NYT*, May 24, 1934.

<sup>154</sup> AP, "Shot the Devil Out of Them," *NYT*, May 24, 1934.

<sup>155</sup> Guinn, 310. 442 indicates original publishing in *Dallas Times-Herald*, May 24, 1934.

Jesse James, placing the duo firmly in the American Outlaw tradition, some stanzas follow

Now Bonnie and Clyde are the Barrow gang  
I'm sure you all have read.  
how they rob and steal;  
and those who squeal,  
are usually found dying or dead.

There's lots of untruths to these write-ups;  
they're not as ruthless as that.  
their nature is raw;  
they hate all the law,  
the stool pidgeons, spotters and rats.

They call them cold-blooded killers  
they say they are heartless and mean.  
But I say this with pride  
that I once knew Clyde,  
when he was honest and upright and clean.

But the law fooled around;  
kept taking him down,  
and locking him up in a cell.  
Till he said to me;  
"I'll never be free,  
so I'll meet a few of them in hell"<sup>156</sup>

Bonnie claims the newspapers exaggerated the couple's violence and, while admitting their rough nature, she blamed Clyde's treatment by the legal system for his violence. Here we see the story of two desperate people on the run, dedicated to each other, and fighting against the system that's done nothing for them so they might as well rob banks.

Later in the poem, Bonnie claims, "From Irving to West Dallas viaduct/is known as the Great Divide./Where the women are kin;/and the men are men,/and they won't

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<sup>156</sup> Guinn, 311.

‘stool’ on Bonnie and Clyde.”<sup>157</sup> Here Bonnie shows another well known part of the Outlaw tradition. She claims that the duo are loved by the common people in Dallas, Texas. She limits the area to an under 10 mile stretch, but perhaps that is because the rest of the populace has been turned against them by the newspapers. The final stanza is particularly notable, “Some day they’ll go down together/they’ll bury them side by side./To few it’ll be grief,/to the law a relief/but it’s death for Bonnie and Clyde.”<sup>158</sup> There was no doubt that Bonnie and Clyde’s life would lead them to a violent death, and that only added to the appeal of this couple. When the outlaw themselves promote themselves as the misunderstood outlaws, the products of the system making their own way, it’s clear who is creating that narrative. But it’s important that the idea of applying that narrative to Bonnie and Clyde was present from the beginning, even if it was only in their own eyes.

If the couple’s dominant reputation is for bungled robberies and violent murder, do they ever get the Robin Hood, romantic treatment? Yes, they do. While Bonnie’s poem can be seen as starting this process, it was instead almost thirty years later that the true beginning of the romantic Bonnie and Clyde image appears.

The most famous depiction of Bonnie and Clyde, and perhaps still the most memorable, is the 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde*. More than anything, this film plays up the lovability of the bank robbers. Sure, the gang’s actions are bloody, and the film became instantly notorious for its violence, but much of the film is dominated by the relationship between our two titular robbers, played by Faye Dunaway and Warren

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<sup>157</sup> Guinn, 312–13.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

Beatty. Furthermore the film focuses a great deal on the sexuality of the relationship. The film even begins with a close-up on Bonnie's lips that zooms out, revealing her to be wearing nothing. This is how she first meets Clyde, seeing him through the window with strategically placed window shades. From the very beginning, the audience cannot help but associate Bonnie with sexuality. This theme is further highlighted with a continuing subplot that focuses on Clyde's sexual impotence. Clyde tells Bonnie straight up after refusing her advances, "Least I ain't a liar. Told you I weren't no lover boy," and later after Bonnie briefly runs away from the gang, she confronts Clyde, "You ignorant, backcountry hillbilly! The only special thing about you is your ideas about lovemaking which is no lovemaking at all!"

Bonnie's insistence pursuing sex and Clyde's refusal and inability to engage her sexually continue throughout the film, serving to reduce Clyde to a sort of childlike state at times. This is most clear when after finding a new hideout and being asked by Bonnie whether he wouldn't like to be alone away from the other members of the gang, Clyde responds, "I always feel like we're alone," after which he pauses and continues, "I'm hungry." These moments, in addition to other moments of ineptitude shown during early robberies, reveal Clyde as a stunted character, whose time in prison has prevented him from maturing in a normal way. Bonnie too receives the same treatment, when she breaks down to Clyde and demands to see her "mama." This family reunion is happy and hazy, as if the whole episode is a dream, broken when despite Clyde's assurances Bonnie's mother warns him, "You best keep runnin', Clyde Barrow." These two bank robbing lovers each seem to have failed to gain some level of maturity, but they stick together, even after the first murder of a bystander when Clyde gives Bonnie a way out.

Importantly, the couple does ultimately consummate their relationship, with Bonnie assuring Clyde he did wonderfully as they share an idyllic picnic, but it is on their return to their hideout after this romantic episode that the fatal, infamous trap is sprung, and Bonnie and Clyde are gunned down in a hail of bullets in slow motion, showing their thrashing bodies covered in bullet wounds. Only when the two are doomed to die can the couple's sexuality fully manifest, and this sexuality plays a huge part in allowing the audience to sympathize with the two robbers.

The portrayal of the gang's robberies further allow the audience to sympathize with the gang, and much of the film's Robin Hood-ing comes with these scenes. The couple is first convinced to rob a bank, when a family of Okies stop by the house they are hidden in to inform them that the house belongs to the bank now. When asked what the couple does, Clyde confidently replies, "We rob banks." While early on in the film we see bungled robberies, including a grocery robbery that leads to a bloody brawl and a bank job that results in Clyde shooting a bank teller point blank in front of the gang, much of the film is dominated by more frivolous robberies. During one robbery Clyde even shoots a guard's gun out of his hand, showing how the money in the bank as their only intention. The getaway sequences continue in this upbeat trend, often undercut by lively banjo music, and one even intercut with excited reactions of those at the bank that they were so close to Bonnie and Clyde. Clyde even tells one farmer to keep the money he's placed on the counter, since it's his and not the bank's. The film emphasizes the friendly nature of the gang. The gang steals a car from a courting couple, and takes them hostage, only to share food and jokes and stories with them, and the saying, "You're folks just like us." Later on, when recovering from the attack that leads to Buck Barrow's death



and Blanche's capture, the couple come across an Okie camp, begging for water and assistance, and each and every person in the camp know exactly who they are. Bonnie and Clyde in the film are friendly, normal folks who have struck against the system, and all the victims of the system know them and celebrate them.<sup>159</sup>

The 1967 film more than any other depiction sets the stage for the celebration and romanticization of Bonnie and Clyde. The film portrays two people desperate for something more. Both have been stunted in their growth in different ways, but in each other they have found a companion who understands and needs them. They use their thirst for adventure and take up the cause that the unfortunate are clamoring for, and they strike against the banks. They form a larger sort of family both with Clyde's own relatives and other accomplices. Along the way, the gang kills a few bystanders and cops, fewer than in reality, but their life is free and frivolous and often fun. The audience knows the couple's doomed fate, but for a while they can make their lives something more. The film strategically chooses certain events to emphasize and certain events to omit, and the audience is given the most alluring possible version of Bonnie and Clyde. They become a pair of Southern star crossed lovers, a lower class Romeo and Juliet with a dash of Robin Hood.

This is the Bonnie and Clyde that has become the dominant image of Bonnie and Clyde. The famous hideout pictures are common, but the reference of them as star crossed criminal lovers has become the dominant point of reference. Other depictions of the couple, with similar and sometimes more egregious historical inaccuracies, have

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<sup>159</sup> *Bonnie and Clyde*, directed by Arthur Penn, 1967, Warner Bros.

followed, including a miniseries and even a Broadway musical.<sup>160</sup> All of these play up the romance and the relationship of the couple, and their names have become bywords for doomed couple, even to the point of appearing in modern pop and hip hop songs: “2017 Bonnie and Clyde/Wouldn’t see the point of living if one of us died” and “Modern day Bonnie and Clyde what they named us/‘Cause when we pull up–brt! brt!–all angles.”<sup>161</sup> Lost are the qualities of precarious and desperate robberies leading to violent encounters and the deaths. Death and violence always feature in their story, but far more important are the sexual and romantic qualities of the relationship between these two bank robbers.

And this sexuality provides a dimension not seen with the other bank robbers. The simplified bare bones version of the Bonnie and Clyde story is that a wily ex-con with a penchant for robbery meets a bored waitress, and after the sparks fly they embark on their legendary crime spree. While the newspaper articles for much of the crime spree barely identify or take much notice of Bonnie Parker, there is an undeniable hint of a sexual element. Why else would a woman be associating with such a dangerous man? In a way it serves unintentionally to humanize Clyde Barrow: if a woman can love him and be his constant companion, how bad can he actually be? And when Bonnie is finally named and recognized, the allure is only heightened. Here is the woman who is not only Clyde’s moll, but partner in crime, just as violent.

Perhaps the reason the Robin Hood, romantic version of Bonnie and Clyde did not gain traction for so long lies in this reluctance for public acknowledgement of sexuality.

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<sup>160</sup> *Bonnie & Clyde*, directed by Bruce Beresford, 2013, Sony Pictures Television. *Bonnie & Clyde*, music by Frank Wildhorn, lyrics by Don Black, book by Ivan Menchell, 2011.

<sup>161</sup> “Him & I” by Halsey and G-Eazy (2017) and “I’m the One” by DJ Khaled with others, (2017) respectively.

Only in the 1960s, as America's sexual mores evolve and become more accepted, can this duo be fully celebrated. Though importantly, even in the film is the deviancy of their sexuality played up, with the sex obsessed Bonnie and impotent Clyde. The source of such a depiction can indeed be found in the source that brought the story of Bonnie and Clyde to the filmmakers attention. In John Toland's *Dillinger Days*, he claims that the gang needed accomplices "not only to assist in the robberies but to help satisfy Bonnie's sexual aberrations. Clyde, who had homosexual tendencies, didn't object to her peculiar tastes."<sup>162</sup> Toland, writing in 1963, provides no source for such claims, and considering the incidents of Clyde's assault in prison, one gets a sense of playing up the sexual deviancy of their relationship. Furthermore, Toland published a column following the premier of the film deriding the choice of Bonnie and Clyde for a romantic movie about bank robbers, while lionizing and celebrating John Dillinger.<sup>163</sup> While Toland was one of the first to seriously tackle these bank robbers as subjects of study and he does raise fair questions about the romanticization of Bonnie and Clyde, it is clear that his analysis leaves something to be desired, and he is just as culpable in the tradition of mythmaking and distortion that follows these bank robbers.

Additionally, other changing factors in the 1960s further allowed Bonnie and Clyde to become celebrated in the 60s. In addition to changing sexual mores, counter-culture became a serious cultural force in the US. This brought with it a tendency to criticize and oppose those in power while promoting and celebrating groups that stood outside the bounds of traditional society. Compounding these forces, more and more

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<sup>162</sup> John Toland, *Dillinger Days* (New York: Random House, 1963), 39.

<sup>163</sup> John Toland, "Sad Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde," *NYT*, Feb. 18, 1968.

individuals grew distrustful of the US government and other powers that be. The Vietnam War with its dubious motivations and the eventual revelations of Watergate and FBI surveillance among other dangerous practices revealed a US government that did not appear to be looking out for individuals, but rather large geopolitical issues at the expense of individuals. This divergence of law and justice reflects the 1930s and the very atmosphere that led to figures like Bonnie and Clyde becoming so famous, but the difference lies in the fact that cultural shifts in the 1960s allowed these figures to become truly counter-cultural icons, anti-heroes as those sort of popular figures became huge in the 1970s and 80s. The 1960s then are key to the celebration of these sort of figures.

Beyond the sexual qualities of their relationship, the standard qualities of the outlaw can still be seen in Bonnie and Clyde. Clyde, from the lower class Texas background who turns to crime, and his time in prison leaves deep marks on him. Bonnie, the bored Texas waitress in search of something more, with no real prospects. Whether or not they were actually motivated to rob banks by a sense of justice and urge to stand up for their fellow lower class victims of the powers that be, that is how Bonnie and Clyde become remembered, with the added memorable qualities of the sexual consequences of their relationship added to further scandalize and excite.

### **John Dillinger**

The quintessential Public Enemy No. 1, John Dillinger didn't have the longest career of the Depression bank robbers, but he, more than any of his contemporaries, became the symbol of the machine gun wielding Depression bank robber. His exploits have become especially legendary, and there's plenty of legend to work through.

A restless, city kid with a knack for trouble, John Dillinger ended up working on a farm with his parents at age 17 when they decided to return to the farming life. After some petty criminal activities, Dillinger robbed a grocer with a weapon and was soon caught.<sup>164</sup> On the advice of his father, he admitted to his crime, and was given a ten to twenty year sentence, not the expected leniency, but his time in prison gave him contacts and lessons from the other imprisoned convicts.<sup>165</sup> At the Indiana State Penitentiary, Dillinger met Harry Pierpont, Charles Makley and Russell Clark who would all form the basis of the later Dillinger gang, and after an eventful time in prison full of myriad small offenses, Dillinger got out on parole on May 20, 1933.<sup>166</sup> He had made overtures that he'd be going straight, as one does when appealing for parole, but his time in prison and the connections he made started him down the path to bank robbing.

Dillinger's first appearance in national news contains little that would indicate the celebrity status he would attain. In October 1933, the 30 year old Dillinger sat in jail in Lima, Ohio after being caught robbing the Bluffton's Citizen Bank when three men burst in, shot the sheriff and broke Dillinger out.<sup>167</sup> Dillinger's career almost ended before it started, but after the jail break he set out, crossing the country repeatedly. He was reported to have been part of a gang that held up a roadhouse in Chicago, but this was most likely an example of the beginning of the hysteria over Dillinger that led to *The Chicago Tribune* to publish a satirical piece claiming that Dillinger was simultaneously

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<sup>164</sup> Dary Matera, *John Dillinger: The Life and Death of America's First Celebrity Criminal* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 11–23.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25, 35.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 37.

<sup>167</sup> "Kill Ohio Sheriff, Free His Prisoner," *NYT*, October 13, 1933.

across the country all at once.<sup>168</sup> Dillinger would soon make his name in Chicago, however.

On January 15, 1934, Dillinger and two companions robbed the First National Bank of East Chicago, making away with over \$20,000, but police alerted by an alarm stood ready outside, and despite using a bank employee as a hostage, Dillinger exchanged shots and killed one Sgt. O'Malley with his Thompson submachine gun.<sup>169</sup> Dillinger normally could pull off a robbery without bloodshed, but this murder would stick with him, though this would remain his only confirmed murder. The gang set out, trying to put distance between them and Chicago, and ended up in Tucson, Arizona. In a curious series of events, a hotel fire broke out in a hotel the morning of January 22, and four men paid firemen to retrieve their suspiciously heavy luggage. The fireman assisted, but one later recognized one of the men as John Dillinger, and the police of Tucson scoured the city, eventually capturing Dillinger, who purportedly said after his surprise arrest, "I'll be the laughing stock of the country. How did I know that a hick town police force would ever suspicion me?" and discovering the heavy luggage had been full of submachine guns and ammunition.<sup>170</sup> After hearings and a speeded along process due to fears of possible escape, Dillinger began his extradition trip to Indiana on January 29, arriving in Chicago on the 30<sup>th</sup> before being transported to Crown Point, Indiana under guard of combined 117 police officers.<sup>171</sup> In a famous picture, John Dillinger can be seen with his arm resting on the prosecutor who would face him in court with the Sheriff of the Crown

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<sup>168</sup> "Dillinger Battle Police in Chicago," *NYT*, January 1, 1934. Matera, 159–60.

<sup>169</sup> "Outlaws Rob Bank, Kill a Policeman," *NYT*, January 16, 1934.

<sup>170</sup> "Dillinger Caught on Fireman's Tip," *NYT*, January 26, 1934.

<sup>171</sup> AP, "Dillinger in Plane on Way to Indiana," *NYT*, January 30, 1934. "Dillinger is back in Indiana Jail," *NYT*, January 31, 1934.

Point Jail Lillian Holley acting friendly.<sup>172</sup> This picture becomes a key part of Dillinger's appeal. Here we see the man himself and he cuts a dashing figure. Despite the article's mention of the electric chair, Dillinger looks unconcerned, and frankly he had good reason to be. The man who first hit national news being busted out of jail would soon pull off his most famous exploit in his own daring escape.

On March 3, John Dillinger broke out of the Crown Point Jail using a wooden gun he had carved and colored with shoe polish. Ernest Blunk, an official at the jail in charge of fingerprinting, entered Dillinger's shared cell to fingerprint his cellmate, and Dillinger stuck the fake gun in his ribs, threatening him. Dillinger then managed to threaten into submission the Warden and the turnkey, lock the three lawmen and 13 prisoners in the cells before sneaking past a sleeping guard, and securing two guns from a National Guardsman posted in the jail. After putting the guardsman and the other guard in the cell, Dillinger asked Herbert Youngblood, a black man accused of murder, to accompany him. Taking Blunk along as a hostage, Dillinger and Youngblood managed to sneak out of the jail, taunting the lawmen and made their way to a nearby garage. There they took one of the garagemen as an additional hostage, and stealing Sheriff Lillian Holley's car, the men drove off. Dillinger, according to Bunk and the garageman, was in fine spirits, singing, "Git along little doggy, git along," before leaving the two men on the road with four dollars to get back to town.<sup>173</sup>

This escape catapulted Dillinger to even greater fame. He had already made a name as a talented and fearless bank robber, but this escape, "that rivals the exploits of

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<sup>172</sup> "22 Who Saw Killing Identify Dillinger," *NYT*, February 1, 1934.

<sup>173</sup> "Dillinger Escapes Jail; Using a Wooden Pistol He Locks Guards in Cell," *NYT*, March 4, 1934.

the heroes of Wild West Thrillers,”<sup>174</sup> cemented Dillinger’s image as the premiere Midwestern rogue. No jail could hold him, and he did not even need a gun to make a play. This comparison with Old Western outlaws must have pleased Dillinger, as apparently as a child he expressed admiration for Jesse James and his gang.<sup>175</sup> Not only within the scholarly realm does Jesse James loom large over Dillinger and his contemporaries. In many ways they were the second coming of these larger than life outlaws, and the public at the time was sure to make the connection.

Dillinger did not take much time after this breakout to return to his old ways. He robbed a bank in Iowa on March 13, only ten days after.<sup>176</sup> From then on, Dillinger would cross the Midwest appearing seemingly everywhere at once. He evaded capture in the Twin Cities, raided a police armory in Illinois, where he “failed to live up to cognomen of the Killer” when he threatened but refused to shoot a police hostage, and then robbed the First National Bank of Pana, Illinois of \$27,629.<sup>177</sup> Soon, another of Dillinger’s most famous incidents came when he escaped from an ambush at a rural Wisconsin lodge called Little Bohemia on April 22nd. Dillinger and his gang had been hiding there when Federal and State law enforcement surrounded and attempted to ambush the bank robbers. Dillinger managed to slip through, and a witness at a nearby lodge reported Dillinger appearing, saying “I’m Dillinger. You needn’t be afraid. I wouldn’t harm a hair

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<sup>174</sup> “Dillinger Escapes Jail; Using a Wooden Pistol He Locks Guards in Cell.”

<sup>175</sup> Matera, 16–17.

<sup>176</sup> AP, “Iowa Bank Bandits Flee with \$52,344,” *NYT*, March 14, 1934.

<sup>177</sup> AP, “Dillinger Shoots Way Out of Trap,” *NYT*, April 1, 1934, “Dillinger Hunted in Gang Hideouts,” *NYT*, April 2, 1934. AP, “Dillinger Raids a Police Station,” *NYT*, April 14, 1934. “\$27,629 Bank Raid Laid to Dillinger,” *NYT*, April 20, 1934.



of your head. Just do as I tell you,” before stealing a car and escaping.<sup>178</sup> It was a disaster for the FBI, who lost an agent and in the crossfire killed a civilian, and agent Melvin Purvis, who had been chasing Dillinger, faced the lion’s share of the blame.<sup>179</sup>

Dillinger simply could not be stopped, though his time was running short. Following the escape from Little Bohemia, Dillinger was involved in two more robberies, these more spread out. He and an accomplice robbed a bank in Fostoria, Ohio in early May, before dropping out of view until a robbery in South Bend at the end of June.<sup>180</sup> Dillinger’s month long absence from the public view alarmed many, and some believed him dead, leading Dillinger’s father to publicly state that he had been in contact through letters with his son and he was, in fact, alive.<sup>181</sup> This quiet time for Dillinger was spent in Chicago, and it was in mid July that the Federal investigation came to fruition, and a trap was laid for John Dillinger.

On the night of July 22, John Dillinger and two women went to the Biograph Theater in Chicago to see *Manhattan Melodrama*, a Clark Gable crime movie. When they arrived to buy tickets, Federal agents were already waiting, and Melvin Purvis recognized Dillinger, and the agents sat outside, waiting at every possible exit from the building for the film’s run time. Dillinger walked out of the theater, and Purvis gave a signal. Walking to an alley, Dillinger saw men approaching. He reached for a pistol and was shot twice in

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<sup>178</sup> “Dillinger Escapes Posses After Two Running Fights; Two Killed, Five Wounded,” *NYT*, April 24, 1934.

<sup>179</sup> Bryan Burroughs, *Public Enemies: America’s Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933–34* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 323.

<sup>180</sup> AP, “Machine Guns Rake Ohio Bank, 3 Shot,” *NYT*, May 4, 1934. AP, “Dillinger Raids Bank in South Bend, Ind., Reported Shot; Officer Slain, Loot \$28,000,” *NYT*, July 1, 1934.

<sup>181</sup> NANA, Inc. “Dillinger is Alive, His Father Asserts,” *NYT*, June 29, 1934.

the chest and once through the neck and face and fell to the pavement. The scene was soon the sight of Federal agents trying to rush Dillinger first to the hospital and then to the morgue while passerbys descended for souvenirs. Some at the scene reported that one of the women at the scene, dubbed “the Girl in Red,” made a signal after leaving the theater before disappearing following Dillinger’s death.<sup>182</sup> Purvis described the scene later, indicating that he had received an undercover tip that Dillinger would be at the film, and he noted, “I was surprised to notice the scar on the left side of his face had been removed without a trace, a nice piece of plastic surgery...I’m glad it’s over.”<sup>183</sup> The girl in red was Ana Sage, a Romanian immigrant threatened with deportation and sometime possible girlfriend to Dillinger, who worked with Purvis to lay the trap for Dillinger, in exchange for help staying in the US.<sup>184</sup> Dillinger’s funeral a few days later in Indiana drew at least 2,500 spectators.<sup>185</sup>

Dillinger’s death came after Bonnie and Clyde’s but before Pretty Boy Floyd. His career was not the longest of the group, but his outrageous exploits made him a favorite of journalists. His name was sure to sell papers. There was only one confirmed murder that could be pinned on Dillinger, but his gang certainly led to more deaths than that. He cultivated a reputation as a genial friendly robber. In addition to the stories of his escape from Crown Point, Indiana and singing “The Last Roundup,” a story came from one of his early robberies in Indiana, when he admonished one of his accomplices for cursing in

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<sup>182</sup> “Dillinger Slain in Chicago; Shot Dead by Federal Men in Front of Movie Theatre,” *NYT*, July 23, 1934.

<sup>183</sup> AP, “Slaying Detailed by Federal Chief,” *NYT*, July 23, 1934.

<sup>184</sup> Burroughs, 398–400.

<sup>185</sup> “Dillinger Funeral Draws Thousands,” *NYT*, July 26, 1934.

front of a lady.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, letters appeared in Indiana newspapers voicing support, “Why should the law have wanted John Dillinger for bank robbery? He wasn’t any worse than bankers and politicians who took the poor people’s money. Dillinger did not rob poor people. He robbed those who became rich by robbing the poor. I am for Johnnie.”<sup>187</sup> Clearly, the Robin Hood element appeared around him during his life, but it’s important to note, as Bryan Burroughs does, that Dillinger did not come from a lower class background. As the son of a grocer who only later returned to farming, Dillinger should be seen having a middle class upbringing.<sup>188</sup> One possible reason this middle class upbringing has been ignored is that the majority of his contemporaries come from poorer backgrounds, and by extension one might assume Dillinger did as well. Furthermore, Dillinger clearly did not embrace this role, and his embrasure of bank robbing reveals a certain contempt for the standard middle class lifestyle. Dillinger’s record then appears middle of the road when it comes to bank robbers. He was a bored teenager who turned to crime, and resentful of the harsh punishment became the nation’s most famous bank robber, known for his daring with a hint of the Robin Hood quality.

Importantly, Dillinger in popular culture has not been so much remembered as a Robin Hood. Rather the collective memory latched onto the danger, daring and geniality of him as a bank robber. The FBI played a part in keeping his memory alive, as he became the FBI’s first, great, shining example of the power of nationwide law enforcement. They were interested in keeping his memory alive as the dangerous killer and bank robber for their own prestige. Dillinger then does not occupy as distinctive a

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<sup>186</sup> Burroughs, 165.

<sup>187</sup> Quoted in Burroughs, 166.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

place. He did have some romanticization happening while he was active, but there was plenty of villainizing happening concurrently that would also shape his image. Dillinger then exists in a strange sort of middle ground.

Dillinger has appeared in a number of films, oddly evenly spread out. The first film came in 1945, solidly in the B-movie tradition starring Laurence Tierney. The film makes little attempt to complicate or present a particular view on the narrative of Dillinger's life, simply presenting a well known figure's life as a draw for ticket sales.<sup>189</sup> Of the bank robbers Dillinger is the only one who received a film treatment so quickly. This by the books type of film did not leave a particularly long lasting legacy, and it took almost 30 years for another attempt to be made.

In 1973, John Milius made his attempt at with *Dillinger*. Milius, screenwriter for films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Jeremiah Johnson*, created a film in a similar vein as 1967's *Bonnie and Clyde*, casting Dillinger still as a criminal, but playing up other qualities to reveal the bank robber as an anti-hero in keeping with emerging trends of the day.<sup>190</sup> With a new embracing of counter culture in the US at the time, films about outlaws and bank robbers were one way to tap into this feeling. Taking both *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Dillinger* together shows how deep this culture of rebellion in the 1960s went. And this time period appears to be the big shift. Rather than continuing the previous narratives of crime and the heroism of the FBI, growing distrust of government shows a willingness to embrace outlaws once again. And this is a feeling that has stuck. Distrust of authority and the apparatus of government has lingered still long after Vietnam and

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<sup>189</sup> *Dillinger*, directed by Max Nosseck, 1945.

<sup>190</sup> *Dillinger*, directed by John Milius, 1973.

Watergate, and so has the celebration of outlaws as anti-heroes, not to mention a large scale embrace of anti-heroes in popular culture in the decades since the 1960s.

Again around 30 years later, Michael Mann directed a film about Dillinger, as well as Melvin Purvis with appearances by Baby Face Nelson and Alvin Karpis. *Public Enemies* (2009) follows Dillinger from the end of 1933 until his death in 1934. The film takes some clear historical liberties. The most obvious change is the shuffling of the timeline to enhance the focus on Dillinger. The film depicts the deaths of Baby Face Nelson and Pretty Boy Floyd as both occurring before Dillinger's, although Dillinger actually died before both. The film also depicts different members of Dillinger's gang dying at inaccurate times, as well as featuring Dillinger involved with the jailbreak that actually occurred as he was sitting in jail waiting to be busted out by the other jailbreakers. The film does paint a fairly accurate picture of a number of the gang's robberies, however.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the movie is the choice of two famous actors for the two leads. Christian Bale plays Melvin Purvis, and Johnny Depp plays Dillinger. These two actors were far older than the men they portrayed, but the deliberate choice of those two actors plays a part in how the audience interacts with the characters. Depp resembles Dillinger to a point, and the recreation of the famous picture taken in the Crown Point jail before Dillinger's escape shows an attention to detail. In Depp's performance he plays up the roguish element that many of the personal accounts of Dillinger indicate. He's charming and suave and defiant in the face of danger and authority. When confronted by Purvis in a jail cell, and asked what keeps him up at night, Dillinger responds, "Coffee." Dillinger cannot be cracked. To enhance this picture of

Dillinger, the film uses the partnership between Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson to amplify the positive qualities of Dillinger. In one bank robbery, Nelson is shown enjoying the chaos and violence, even celebrating when he shoots a cop. Dillinger, on the other hand, is always depicted as efficient and while he uses his Thompson constantly, the film emphasizes that Dillinger did not flippantly commit murder. Furthermore, in one of the robberies, as Dillinger and the gang are leaving, he passes a man whose cash sits on the counter and Dillinger stops to say, "Put it away. We're here for the bank's money not yours." And after taking a woman hostage upon leaving the bank, Dillinger sees her shivering and gives her his own coat. The Robin Hood Dillinger is on full display.

The film also devotes time to developing the relationship between Dillinger and his lover, Billie Frechette. At their initial meeting, when she asks him what he does, he responds, "I'm John Dillinger. I rob banks." Dillinger is short on time, and when he sees a woman he likes he does not beat around the bush. He tells her that the rich people that surround them in the restaurant only care where people come from, but he is all about where people are going. When Billie asks him where he is going, he responds, "Anywhere I want." Later, when he asks her to be his girl and she protests, saying she doesn't know anything about him, he says, "I was raised on a farm in Mooresville, Indiana. My momma died when I was three. My daddy beat the hell out of me cause he didn't know no better way to raise me. I like baseball, movies, good clothes, fast cars, whisky, and you. What else you need to know?" From then on, the couple are inseparable until she is arrested by Federal agents.

The Crown Point Jail escape and the Little Bohemia shootout are two major moments of the film. On a technical note, both these sequences, as well as much of the

movie, utilize hand held camera shots that provide a documentary like feel, giving the audience the feeling of running beside Dillinger. In tense moments such as the escape, the shootout, and the robberies, the film also lacks a soundtrack. The only sounds made during these sequences are guns firing and people shouting. This gives the film a feeling of rawness in a way, that despite the historical inaccuracies, the film feels unsentimental, unromantic. The Robin Hood Dillinger may appear in key scenes in the film, but the film does not interrogate Dillinger as a character. Noted film critic Roger Ebert puts it well, “it deprives me of some stubborn need for closure. His name was John Dillinger, and he robbed banks. But there had to be more to it than that, right? No, apparently not.”<sup>191</sup>

Before Dillinger’s death, the film alternates between showing the Federal agents waiting outside the Biograph Theater, and Dillinger enjoying the film inside. Utilizing clips from *Manhattan Melodrama*, the film chooses to emphasize Clark Gable’s last lines in the film, “Die the way you live, all of the sudden. That’s the way to go. Don’t drag it out. Living like that doesn’t mean a thing,” and show Dillinger smiling slightly, before he exits the theater and meets the Federal agents and his fate.<sup>192</sup>

Considering his portrayals and the contemporary accounts of John Dillinger, there are multiple competing narratives. On one hand, there were always small indications and attempts to forge a Robin Hood like identity for Dillinger, both constructed by him and by others around him. At the same time, he became so notorious that the FBI latched onto him as a symbol of violent crime and lawlessness. And yet still, common to both is the roguish John Dillinger, the one who sang as he drove away in the Sheriff’s own car and

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<sup>191</sup> Roger Ebert, “Public Enemies,” *RogerEbert.com*.  
<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/public-enemies-2009>

<sup>192</sup> *Public Enemies*, directed by Michael Mann, 2009, Universal Pictures.

gave carfare to his hostages, the John Dillinger who threatened others with death often, yet rarely killed. Dillinger, more than the other bank robbers of his day, was full of contradictions. He didn't grow up a poor farmer, just a restless city kid with problems with authority. He robbed banks, but it was never clear if he did it for the thrills, the money, striking a blow against the system. One can view his story as tragic, as some popular culture depictions do, as a criminal who craved escape, freedom, and to rob banks who lived on borrowed time and was doomed from the start. One can also view his story as Public Enemy No.1, a bad egg from his petty roots as a criminal who became the scourge of the Midwest stealing and bringing violence wherever he went. Clearly many with differing agendas know the power of this alluring outlaw, and competing romanticization shows how powerful controlling the legacy of such figures can be.

### **Pretty Boy Floyd**

Of the major bank robbers of the day, Pretty Boy Floyd became the most identified with the Robin Hood role from the very beginning. However, the FBI also pursued him for suspected involvement in one of the most notorious crimes of the day. The popular depictions of Floyd tended to emphasize his Robin Hood qualities and his good nature, but he also never received solo treatment in film, often appearing in movies depicting other gangsters as a supporting character or bit part. With Floyd it is often even more difficult to sort through the myth and the facts.

Charles Arthur Floyd was born February 3, 1904, to a large family of Oklahoma sharecroppers, who after a few moves became a respected farming family. Floyd was, according to his family, a well behaved kid, with the worst charge laid at him the theft of cookies, but after he spent time as a harvest hand and began spending time with oil field



workers, Floyd earned a reputation as eager to fight.<sup>193</sup> He did, in 1924, marry a young girl named Ruby Hargraves, and at the end of the year they had a child named Charles Dempsey. Floyd later met Fred Hilderbrand, a petty criminal who persuaded Floyd to join him on a few robberies. After a string of Kroger grocery store robberies in St. Louis, and the addition of another accomplice, the three men decided to rob the Kroger headquarters immediately after a payroll delivery. While they escaped from the scene with a decent score, the police tracked them down, and he went to the Missouri State Penitentiary on December 18, 1925 for a five year sentence. One of the Kroger workers described Floyd to police as a “pretty boy” and the nickname stuck. He got out in March 1929, and Ruby filed for divorce, which was granted. With nowhere to go, Floyd followed his cellmate Alfred Lovett to Kansas City, following guarantees of work of questionable legality.<sup>194</sup>

In Kansas City, Floyd was arrested a mere two days after his release from prison, for suspicion, and this would occur five more times in 1929.<sup>195</sup> Tiring of his targeting in Kansas City, Floyd returned to Oklahoma, but kept mobile between Kansas City and Oklahoma before deciding to join up with a gang of robbers led by James Bradley in Akron, Ohio, but after a few robberies the gang got involved in a shootout and eventually they were all arrested though Floyd was using an alias at the time.<sup>196</sup> However, Floyd, like many gangsters of his day swore he would not return to a penitentiary. And as he was being transported from jail to the Ohio State Pen on December 10, 1930 by train, Floyd

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<sup>193</sup> Jeffery S. King, *The Life & Death of Pretty Boy Floyd* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), 12–14..

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–23

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–33.

asked to use the bathroom, and broke through the window, escaping from custody, not to be arrested again.<sup>197</sup>

After this escape, Floyd spent the next four years on and off robbing banks across the Midwest. Not easy to pin down, he robbed banks in Oklahoma, Missouri, and Ohio, and witnesses and journalists would often attach his name to unsolved crimes, everything from bank robbery to kidnapping. He spent late 1931 into January 1932 in Oklahoma robbing banks.<sup>198</sup> In January, he was named as a suspect in a massacre of police officers.<sup>199</sup> However, it is not believed that he actually took part in this, but this sparked a frenzy around Floyd.<sup>200</sup> On January 14, Floyd was named reported by police officers as having taken part in two robberies on the same day ten miles apart, leading the Oklahoma Banker's association to call for assistance from the National Guard, and *The Daily Oklahoman* reported, "Nearly a dozen bank raids are attributed to Floyd, whose activities are said to include so-called 'Robin Hood' acts of charity. In return, the persons to whom he gives financial aid, shield him from the law."<sup>201</sup> Floyd then established early on in his bank robbing career this popular image of him as friend to the common man and lower classes.<sup>202</sup> Articles appeared through the rest of the month. The acting governor offered a \$1,000 reward with an association of bankers offered to match that, and the *Daily*

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<sup>197</sup> King, 37.

<sup>198</sup> Burroughs, 20.

<sup>199</sup> AP, "Three Sought in Massacre Identified," *Daily Oklahoman* (hereafter *DO*), January 4, 1932.

<sup>200</sup> Burroughs, 20.

<sup>201</sup> AP, "Militia 'War' Against Bank Bandit Urged," *DO*, January 15, 1932.

<sup>202</sup> As mentioned previously, films depict other bank robbers engaging in similar activities, but Floyd is the only one whose acts are mentioned in contemporary news reports.

*Oklahoman* ran a scathing article, accompanied by a cartoon showing Oklahoma law crisscrossing the state in search of Floyd, describing,

All the cops and constables in Oklahoma still were searching for Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd Monday night...Floyd, blamed with virtually every crime committed in Oklahoma this year, including the current translation of the Wickersham commission’s report and the new state income tax, has been seen in a couple of dozen places simultaneously, from Waukomis to Wapanucka...Floyd has been “seen” in as many as three places at the same time, all of which is a physical impossibility as any amateur detective knows. Even the 70-mile-per-hour gait at which the “Pretty Boy” is reported to travel would not have been enough to get him around to all of the places where he is supposed to have left his calling card since January 1.<sup>203</sup>

Floyd even went as far as to send a letter to the governor condemning such a reward and defending his actions, stating, “I have robbed no one but the monied men.”<sup>204</sup>

Floyd then, as happened to Dillinger later, became a sort of bank robbing boogey man for Oklahoma. His career lasted a longer time, but it was more inconsistent. Part of this is Floyd’s constant movement. He would rob a few banks in one area before moving on to another state and continuing there. These multitudes of smaller robberies allow him to fly under the radar for a decent amount of time. However, one of Floyd’s first appearances in national news comes in April 1932, when during a raid on a farm near Tulsa, Oklahoma, Floyd shot and killed Irving Kelly, leader of the posse and ex-Sheriff, before escaping.<sup>205</sup> Bank robbing always possesses an inherent element of violence, and when Floyd was being pursued for months, a day was bound to come that would see him murder. Despite the often friendly reputation Floyd is associated with, he did commit murder on a few occasions.

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<sup>203</sup> “Floyd Reward Totals \$2,000,” *DO*, January 17, 1932. “Floyd Search is Oklahoma’s Rangers Claim,” *DO*, January 26, 1932.

<sup>204</sup> AP, “Floyd Blamed for Imposing List of Crimes in Midwest,” *DO*, October 23, 1934.

<sup>205</sup> AP, “Bandit Slays Ex-Sheriff,” *NYT*, April 10, 1932.

He spent much of 1932 into 1933 robbing fewer and fewer banks, while law enforcement still searched for him. During this time he began his association with a fellow bank robber, though one with a reputation as an unskilled drunk, named Adam Richetti and spent much of his time with his family, until a number of his relatives were arrested, prompting Floyd to leave Oklahoma.<sup>206</sup> Floyd again made national news in June when he and Richetti kidnapped a Missouri Sheriff. The two were on the run and in need of a car, and the Sheriff found the two men holding some garage workers at gunpoint. The Sheriff joined them and once a car was ready, Floyd brought the Sheriff along and while the car was found later, the Sheriff had not yet been located.<sup>207</sup> Floyd and Richetti were headed towards Kansas City, and they brought the Sheriff along for fourteen hours and 500 miles of their trip. Floyd and Richetti asked the Sheriff to direct them along roads that would their pursuers would have difficulty with, and forced him at one point to wave off highway patrolmen who found them. The Sheriff said that he found that Floyd “sure is a good driver,” as well as, “I saw right way, [Floyd] would kill a man, but not unless he had to,” while the Sheriff did not favor Richetti and his drinking.<sup>208</sup> While Floyd may not have been as jolly as Dillinger when on the run, the Sheriff’s impression of Floyd shows much. He was a serious man, clearly capable of violence considering his previous murder, but the Sheriff saw him as a man with some sort of a code. However, on that very day a much more infamous event dominated the news.

Frank Nash, a criminal also from Oklahoma, had escaped from prison, and was being transported back to Leavenworth prison in Kansas. He was put in a car after

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<sup>206</sup> Burroughs 21. AP, “Floyd Gangsters Captured,” *NYT*, June 4, 1933.

<sup>207</sup> AP, “Outlaw in Missouri Kidnaps a Sheriff,” *NYT*, June 17, 1933.

<sup>208</sup> AP, “Missouri Sheriff Freed by Abductors,” *NYT*, June 18, 1933.

arriving in Kansas City with six officers for the next leg of his journey when machine gun toting men appeared and fired indiscriminately into the car. The men were apparently trying to spring Nash, but he was killed along with four law enforcement officers in addition to two wounded officers. The gunmen quickly fled the scene. According to some, one of those gunmen was Pretty Boy Floyd, but Chief Detective TJ Higgins doubted such.<sup>209</sup> When asked, the Sheriff that Floyd had recently kidnapped and let go also said he doubted Floyd's involvement, though he was released around 20 miles from Kansas City.<sup>210</sup> A few weeks later, the Department of Justice ordered the arrest of Pretty Boy Floyd in connection with the massacre, along with five other escaped convicts who had been associates of Frank Nash.<sup>211</sup>

Whether or not Pretty Boy Floyd was involved in the Kansas City Massacre has long remained contested. From a certain perspective, such a cold blooded action does not match the Robin Hood and reluctant killer image that Floyd appeared to possess, but that image clearly did not always bear a strong semblance to reality. Michael Wallis, in his biography of Floyd, cites many people close to and who knew Floyd as well as many forgotten testimonials from witnesses and other police officers who had been chasing Floyd to claim his innocence in the Massacre.<sup>212</sup> Others were not so convinced. Jeffery King claims, "The evidence is overwhelming that Floyd, Richetti, and Miller were involved in the killings," and he points out that many of the eyewitnesses and other such sources changed their stories repeatedly and furthermore, one of Melvin Purvis's

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<sup>209</sup> "Massacre in Kansas City," *NYT*, June 18, 1933.

<sup>210</sup> AP, "Killers Evade Kansas City's Police Search," *DO*, June 18, 1933.

<sup>211</sup> AP, "Seek 'Pretty Boy' Floyd," *NYT*, July 7, 1933.

<sup>212</sup> Michael Wallis, *Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 316–23.

informants had heard through viable channels that Floyd was there.<sup>213</sup> Bryan Burroughs relates that Michael LaCapra told the FBI the version of the story that he had heard, that Floyd had been involved, and the FBI later received two other testimonies that confirmed this story, though it should be noted that the two confirmations came after “third degree interrogation,” a euphemistic term for questioning that lasts days and days involving torture.<sup>214</sup> Ultimately, Burroughs concluded that Floyd was indeed involved, basing this assertion of accounts located in the FBI’s file on Alvin Karpis, another famous bank robber/kidnapper of the day, that included two identical testimony from people with no concrete connection to Floyd, giving them little reason to lie, as well as a statement from Alvin Karpis who claimed that Floyd had admitted to him in 1934 that he had taken part in the massacre.<sup>215</sup>

Strong evidence places Floyd at the scene of the massacre, but regardless, the Kansas City Massacre tainted Floyd and it followed him for the rest of his life. He spent much of the rest of 1933 and 1934 in hiding. Law enforcement still searched for him and the FBI were still investigating the Kansas City Massacre. Dillinger also began his most publicized bank robberies and escapes and the spotlight shifted. Scattered reports and erroneous crediting of crimes came and went, but Pretty Boy Floyd remained elusive. He almost reappears in a report in June of 1934, but it appears some overeager officers acted quickly on a tip of two men in the vicinity of Floyd’s Cookson Hills haunting grounds,

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<sup>213</sup> King, 125.

<sup>214</sup> Burroughs, 446–52.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.

but there was no trace of Floyd.<sup>216</sup> As Floyd continued to evade detection while Bonnie and Clyde and Dillinger both died at the hands of law enforcement, the FBI finally declared unequivocally that Pretty Boy Floyd had been one of the gunners at the Kansas City Massacre.<sup>217</sup>

The noose would finally tighten in October 1934. Shortly after the FBI's announcement, the law finally found Pretty Boy Floyd, as two Iowa officers recognized Floyd while driving and gave chase, but Floyd drove away after a gun battle.<sup>218</sup> In the following weeks, reports of sightings of Floyd came across the Midwest, but Floyd reappeared in Iowa, wounded after a gun battle that led to the capture of Adam Richetti, his accomplice who was also fingered for the Massacre.<sup>219</sup> This would prove to be a chase that Floyd wouldn't win. Floyd turned up at a farm seven miles east of East Liverpool Ohio and after a tip, so did Melvin Purvis and eight law enforcement officers, and when Floyd began to run, he was shot, the news falsely reporting fourteen bullets, though he survived long enough to be questioned about the Kansas City Massacre, which he denied any involvement in.<sup>220</sup> Floyd's last words were "Fuck you, Fuck you. Fuck you. I'm going."<sup>221</sup> The autopsy report later said that Floyd had been shot three times, twice in the chest and once in the forearm.<sup>222</sup> Later controversy arose over whether or not

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<sup>216</sup> AP, "Dillinger and Floyd Are Hunted in Vain by Sixty Officers in Raid on Ozark Farm," *NYT*, June 25, 1934.

<sup>217</sup> AP, "Depot Massacre Laid to 3 Killers," *NYT*, October 1, 1934.

<sup>218</sup> AP, "Floyd Shoots Way Out of Iowa Trap," *NYT*, October 12, 1934.

<sup>219</sup> AP, "Posses Hunt Floyd in Dense Ohio Woods," *NYT*, October 22, 1934.

<sup>220</sup> "Pretty Boy Floyd Slain as He Flees by Federal Men," *NYT*, October 23, 1934.

<sup>221</sup> King, 185.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 196–97.

Floyd had been shot again as he lay dying, but these stories appear to be fabrication.<sup>223</sup>

When his body returned to Oklahoma, 20,000 people turned out for his funeral.<sup>224</sup> Chased down on a farm in Ohio, Pretty Boy Floyd was killed by a similar group of men as Dillinger had been, and the raucous turnout to his funeral indicates that no matter how long he spent out of the public eye and the allegations by the FBI of mass murder, there was still a certain amount of adoration for the man.

Pretty Boy Floyd had a unique career, the child of farmers who turned to crime for unclear reasons, spent time in jail, returning to crime upon his release and gaining a reputation for Robin Hood like behavior before seemingly contenting himself with constantly running from the law. Eventually, 11 murders were attributed to him, but as with many of these criminals, it's unclear how many of these were due to convenience of narrative.<sup>225</sup> The most clear aspect of Pretty Boy Floyd's life is the unusual intensity of comparisons of him to Robin Hood. Even if he did in fact participate in the Kansas City Massacre, the number of people who did not believe it would have been him shows the sort of man many members of the public imagined him as. He wasn't just a criminal. He was a bank robber, standing up for the poor farmers just like him. Sure he might have committed some violence, but in the face of hopelessness in the Depression, that might have been the only way to resist. This is the Pretty Boy Floyd that persists in the popular imagination. Most tellingly, it did not take long for cultural productions to latch onto Floyd the Robin Hood.

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<sup>223</sup> Burroughs, 468.

<sup>224</sup> AP, "20,000 Attend Burial of Floyd in Oklahoma," *NYT*, October 29, 1934.

<sup>225</sup> "Floyd Blamed for Imposing List of Crimes in Midwest."



Pretty Boy Floyd notably appears in a fixture of Depression-era American culture, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Upon Tom Joad's return from prison and his reunion with his mother, she voices her concerns,

I knowed Purty Boy Floyd. I knowed his ma. They was good folks. He was full a hell, sure, like a good boy oughta be... I don' know all like this—but I know it. He done a little bad thing an' they hurt 'im caught 'im an' hurt him so he was mad, an' the nex' bad thing he done was mad, an' they hurt 'im again. An' purty soon he was mean-mad. They shot at him like a varmint, an' he shot back, an' then they run him like a coyote, an' him a-snappin' an' a-snarlin', mean as a lobo. An' he was mad. He wasn't no boy or no man no more, he was jus' a walkin' chunk a mean-mad. But the folks that knowed him didn' hurt 'im. He wasn' mad at them. Finally they run him down an' killed 'im. No matter how they say it in the paper how he was bad—that's how it was.<sup>226</sup>

Importantly this also mirrors the protagonist Tom Joad's ultimate choice to spend his days helping those who have no one else, subtly indicating that Joad is following a slightly more heroic but ultimately similar path to Floyd. The love of Pretty Boy Floyd by some people can easily be seen here. He made a few mistakes and the law came down harsh and turned him into what he was. He wasn't a mean murderer, just trying to stand up for his people, but the law turned him into the criminal. There isn't even the Robin Hood element clearly present here, but rather depicting Floyd as a victim of state violence. This becomes a common element of Floyd's story, and here it is beginning in 1939, only five years after his death.

Another famous early example of Floyd's romanticization is the song "Pretty Boy Floyd" by Woody Guthrie. First recorded in 1940 and recorded again in 1945, Woody Guthrie tells a mostly fictional account of Floyd's life in ballad form. He tells of Floyd's first encounter with the law coming when he defends his wife from a brutish sheriff. The

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<sup>226</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin 2009, originally published 1939), 76.

verses also describe Floyd paying off mortgages of starving farmers or leaving behind \$1000 bills after an sharing a meal or even supplying a whole load of groceries for “the families on relief” for Christmas. Guthrie finishes the song

Now through this world I’ve rambled,  
I’ve met lots of funny men.  
Some will rob you with a six gun  
And some with a fountain pen.  
But as through your life you travel  
And as through your life you roam  
You won’t ever see an outlaw  
Drive a family from their home.<sup>227</sup>

Guthrie’s Pretty Boy Floyd is entirely a Robin Hood, and hence entirely fictional. It makes a great song, but not great for its accuracy. But that final stanza illustrates why so many people would latch onto this image of Pretty Boy Floyd. He will help when no one else would. In a time of want and deprivation, someone needs to stand up and help people. When major pillars of society such as the banks turn on the people and become an enemy as they foreclose and take possession of people’s homes, all within the law, the only heroes left are outlaws. And Pretty Boy Floyd had that connection and those stories attached to him from the very beginning, regardless if he did ever actually destroy mortgage records.

Intriguingly, Pretty Boy Floyd never received biopic films like Dillinger or Bonnie and Clyde. Dillinger was a celebrity known everywhere, a prime candidate for a film. Bonnie and Clyde may not have been well known or particularly celebratable, but the inherent sexuality of their criminal relationship and some borrowings from other outlaws makes them an attractive subject for a film. But why not Pretty Boy Floyd? He

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<sup>227</sup> Woody Guthrie, “Pretty Boy Floyd,” recorded 1944, track 5 on *Buffalo Skinners: The Asch Recordings Vol. 4*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1999.

appears in Dillinger's movies as background, as a side character, as a way for Purvis' character to develop, but why not Floyd's development? One aspect might be the long stretches of his career without robberies, but the facts never got in the way of any filmmaker. He can be a Robin Hood in song, a victim of state violence in literature, but apparently not a central figure of a film. Perhaps, it boils down to notoriety. He was overshadowed by Dillinger, but so were Bonnie and Clyde. Perhaps it's because if one analyzes his story, and molds it in the same way as Arthur Penn did for Bonnie and Clyde and Michael Mann did for John Dillinger, the only motivating factor for Floyd's crimes are either class or boredom. He was an antsy kid, and it drove him to crime. But his time in the prison system did not straighten him out, did not discipline him into a productive member of society. Floyd's time in prison taught him how to be a better criminal, how to become a notorious outlaw. And when he achieved that, many people celebrated him. Poor farmers losing their homes to the banks celebrated him. There is no magic charisma and roguery a la Dillinger, and no sex via a female criminal companion to distract from these core elements. The failure of justice in the Great Depression that allowed criminals to become heroes. Perhaps that is why Pretty Boy Floyd is never put at the forefront of the bank robber stories.

### **Conclusion**

With Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger, and Pretty Boy Floyd, some obvious parallels arise. Comparing to Meyer's categorization, each bank robber fits the twelve qualities to differing degrees. Their first crimes were not exactly brought about by extreme persecution, rather boredom and lack of opportunity. While each of them received some support from the people, none of them could truly be classified as a "man

of the people.” However, each of those twelve categories readily applies to their popular depictions. Big surprise, but one can clearly see the where and the why of the romanticization of the outlaw.

But why these figures are romanticized is far more important than how they are romanticized. As hinted at previously with Pretty Boy Floyd, the key to this lies in the feelings of the country towards the banks. With the Depression, especially in the rural Midwest, the banks became a symbol of the broken system, a symbol of the system failing the vast majority of the population only to enrich a few. Even worse, when this occurs for four or five years without relief, people can only feel more and more desperate. Then suddenly a new type of crime wave grips the country. A bunch of ex cons, some escaped from prison, some just out on parole, decide that their time in prison had taught them one thing: how to rob and steal. And who better to direct this anger towards than the financial system that has failed them and their families? While they didn't all come from poor backgrounds, those from poor backgrounds celebrated them. They were heroes because they stood up and acted, did something while so many felt paralyzed and unable to act.

This celebration did not end after their deaths. Rather, when the country took a turn to embracing counter culture, this celebration of the outlaw arose again. Especially in the 1960s and 70s, when the public did not know the extent of the FBI's illegal activities but they did know about presidential improprieties and a corrupt war that has shaken the trust of the younger generation not to mention the civil rights movement that had a key strategy of breaking the law in order to show how immoral the laws were. The bank robbers by no means on the same level of the civil rights activists, but drastic times

call for drastic heroes. And the skepticism and distrust of government has not ended. Rather, that has lingered, as popular culture's obsession with moral gray areas and anti-heroes indicates, and as information becomes more available and communication becomes easier, injustices by the powers that be are easier to see than ever. Granted, this increased access to information makes bank robbery far more difficult than in the 1930s, which is perhaps why the Depression-era bank robbers persist. They were the last gasp of a wilder world, living on their own terms, and they show a freedom that in certain ways is not attainable today. Just as the beginnings of imperialism brought pirates into the popular imagination as romantic heroes, and the closing of the frontier and the industrialization of the US brought cowboys as a symbolic hero, so did the Great Depression make unconventional heroes of the bank robbers John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, and Pretty Boy Floyd.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers still do not share that much in common, but rather, how these historical figures have been crafted into symbols and romantic representations bears great resemblance to each other. In their own unique ways, each became their own strange sort of hero.

Eighteenth century pirates lived on their own terms. They carved out their own sometimes progressive world niche in a changing world that seemed to care little about individuals as long as the empire expanded. In a time of great change, they adopted their own egalitarian changes. They answered to no king, only to a captain they often could elect or condemn with a vote. Pirates even allowed considerable power to some who would not achieve such in society for hundreds of years after, such as the women pirates Mary Read and Anne Bonny. However, it is important to remember that many of these qualities were adopted piecemeal, and to cast pirates as an overall progressive force would be irresponsible due to their complicity in racist, sexist, and violent imperialism. And while pirates have spent much of the time as the colorful villains in popular culture, there have always been hints of admiration for these bold figures. And when counter-culture and rebellion become the norm and the most celebrated attributes, pirates can easily turn from villain to rock stars.

Cowboys found a life that was already doomed to end when it began, but enjoyed the freedom all the same. Anyone could see that the land newly wrested from the Native Americans would be free of widespread white settlement for only a short time, but in that time this relatively diverse migrant labor force did the best they could. The work was

dangerous. The pay was low. But these cowboys were able to escape the rapidly modernizing Eastern US for a simpler life out West watching over cattle and horses and crossing the vast expanses of newly conquered land. The fences and factories came quickly though and cowboying survived a bit longer in more sparsely populated areas, but soon was relegated to but a small portion of ranch work. But somehow, this labor force took on an importance many times greater than the workers themselves ever felt. With a few alterations to simplify the narrative, such as whitewashing the whole profession, emphasizing the violent masculinity of the life, and conflating cowboys with cavalry soldiers, frontiersmen, and gunfighters, cowboys become the symbol of the American nation: masculine, self-sufficient, and white expansionist. The tough reality of cowboying gave way to a multitude of sensationalized novels, films, and songs all romanticizing the time when men were men.

Bank robbers burst onto an American landscape ravaged by the Great Depression, populated with lower class people questioning how the banks and the powers could leave so many behind. These men and women, mostly lower class individuals themselves with criminal backgrounds and little opportunity, created their own work, robbing the banks that so many hated and living on the fringe of society, becoming a new generation of American outlaw. In many ways they replicated a life of Old Western outlaws and freedom from the confines of society that many clearly already romanticized as the embrace of cowboys illustrate. They serve as one last moment when one could be free from the bounds of civilized society. They were doomed, and changing strategies of law enforcement ensured that the gaps that these outlaws exploited would soon close. They lived violently, and they all met violent ends. For a time, their legacy would be that of

violent criminals, scourges of the nation that required the creation of a noble new type of law enforcement to enforce the law for the safety of the public. But as America grew distrustful of authority and trust in government was shaken by the events of the 1960s and 70s, some found in these violent criminals the makings of counter culture icons. These outlaws may not have operated within the bounds of the law, but in a way they were on the side of justice, standing up for those who could not. They were on the side of freedom. They were Robin Hoods, outlaws with hearts of gold. Sure there were murders and violence, but maybe a little violence was acceptable if it was for the right side. In a way these bank robbers become early anti-heroes. They may not follow the rules, but they have a code all their own.

Each of these figures represents freedom to varying degrees: freedom from new forms of bondage and expansion that does not value human life, freedom from a life of fences and limitations and forcing to settle down and behave politely, freedom from an unjust system that only cares about those with money. In some ways, each of these figures did exercise the freedom that the romanticization emphasizes so. But there are more factors that are often hidden: egalitarianism, diversity, solidarity. There is a reason these figures have survived as unconventional heroes for so long. They had causes and codes that while illegal or immoral to some, cast light on deeper injustice.

However, all of these figures have darker sides that also gets silenced by romanticization. The violence that all of these characters created and existed with should not be ignored. Pirates murdered, raped, pillaged, stole, and some participated in the Atlantic slave trade. They may have given freedom to some who did not have it, but they also took the freedom of others and cared little for those caught in the crossfire. Some



even took part in and maintained imperial power structures that others rebelled against. Cowboys could not have made a living without the land stolen from Native Americans. In some cases, the cowboys themselves played a part in this theft. Cowboys were but one step in the march of imperialist expansion and colonialism that marked the subjugation of the American West. The workforce was diverse and Native Americans even became cowboys, but their role in Euroamerican colonialism cannot be silence. Bank robbers also practiced widespread violence. The police officers, security guards, bank tellers, and innocent bystanders and hostages who died at their hands must not be forgotten. They kidnapped and some stole not only from banks, but from stores and others who were just trying to make a living. In a way this violence has a way of being forgotten and forgiven, especially the more time that has passed. Despite this, the violence and villainy that these figures did engage in should not be forgotten.

And the sometimes malicious effects of using these figures as romantic symbols must also be acknowledged. Cowboys present a particularly obvious case. The American ideal of the self sufficient white cowboy promotes a particularly racist and hypermasculine view of the nation. The cowboy has so often been coopted for narratives of self sufficiency that argue against assisting underprivileged community. The cowboy has been used to erase the diverse history of the Western US, and to advance a view of the West as virgin land ripe for rightful claim by white America. The symbolic cowboy in particular flies in the face of much of what cowboys actually were and presents a particularly harmful manipulation. Pirates and bank robbers are not innocent on this front either.

Also, it is important to note that whiteness dominates the romantic depiction of these figures. Pirates operated at a time when the Atlantic world was becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. Pirates came from all different backgrounds, and there is a long history of piracy beyond European piracy in the eighteenth century, but the romantic pirate, the pirate that popular culture embraces so often is a white, European pirate. Some treatments depict nonwhite pirates, but the most often romanticized remain white figures. This is especially obvious when one compares how the character of Captain Jack Sparrow is regarded in popular culture to the emergence of Somali pirates as a particular group. Perhaps it is simply how close in time we are to Somali pirates, but there is a noticeable lack of romanticization of these figures. As stated above, the romantic cowboy is also a white cowboy. Despite the presence of cowboys from many races and ethnicities, John Wayne remains the quintessential cowboy, and people of color remain most often cast in sidekick or villain roles. This remains a particularly egregious example of historical distortion given the intensely diverse history of the American West and its status as a cultural crossroad. Bank robbers present a different issue, but it is notable that all of the famous bank robbers of the day were white. Bonnie and Clyde and the rest of the Barrow Gang, John Dillinger and his gang, Pretty Boy Floyd, Baby Face Nelson, Alvin Karpis, the Barrow Gang, Machine Gun Kelly and more obscure bank robbers are all white. Why was bank robbing a particularly white endeavor? I cannot answer that question for sure. But it is important to note that these white bank robbers receive the historical romanticization treatment while non-white criminals rarely become folk heroes to the wider American populace.

Furthermore, each of these groups are particularly male dominated, and while I have attempted to analyze their masculinity, it should be noted that these historically romanticized figures tend to be male. Bonnie Parker was a female bank robbers, and Mary Read and Anne Bonny were both famous female pirates, but these three individuals are the notable exceptions. Especially in the case of pirates and the history of piratical violence against women, this tendency to romanticize and favorably depict male-dominated fields cannot be ignored.

At the end, what are we left with then? Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers were complex historical figures that engaged in both violent and harmful practices, yet are also marked by some particularly favorable qualities that have led them to become romanticized symbols. These symbols have a checkered history. They can be used for harmful and discriminatory purposes, but by searching for deeper truths these figures can also lead to surprising revelations about figures that have often been denounced in their respective times. The most important quality that unites these figures is freedom, and perhaps their romanticization taken as a whole reflects a deep desire for unregulated lives, free from authority. Perhaps it also reflects a desire for adventure and excitement. At some level, these figures also reveal that historical periods of great change, especially those marked by questions of justice and legality provide opportunities for unconventional heroes, but one should be careful about too much celebration of such figures, as such confusing periods also allow for violence and harmful injustices.

One final question: if pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers all emerged decades later as heroes, who in the present day might undergo this process? My choice of subjects do not have always have clear counterparts in the present day. It is unclear if Somali

pirates will ever become as familiar cultural icons as European pirates. And while piracy has a host of new connotations now with internet piracy, such activities do not exactly provide the same sense of adventure and freedom. The US still clings to cowboys as indicative of the national character and symbolic of when men were men, and despite the ever growing history of the revisionist Western, it is doubtful that the cowboy will cease to be a presence in American culture. Bank robberies grow rarer and rarer and increasing technology makes crime sprees like that of the Depression unlikely. On a broader scale, romanticizing criminal activity does not seem to go out of style. The genre of gangsta rap and the history of Blaxploitation cinema show a similar tendency to romanticize crime as bank robbers, though in a decidedly black context. Similarly both blues and country music have a long history of depicting criminal activities, even murder, in a sympathetic light. Interestingly, these examples have already attained a sort of acceptance in widespread culture, so I am unsure if they are particularly strong parallels.

In a different sense, there are plenty of historical and contemporary examples of romanticizing and demonizing political groups. Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers all have been used for political purposes, but the individuals and groups themselves did not particularly engage in politics. There is a long history of political groups being demonized in their lifetime before having their legacies rehabilitated such as the Black Panthers in the US. On a worldwide scale, militant political groups also often are alternately romanticized and demonized. The Irish Republican Army, for example, engaged in bombing and assassination campaigns, creating in some cases mass terror, but still retained devoted supporters who believed that the overall cause was just. I am

hesitant to group these examples with pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers due to their intensely political nature.

Furthermore, the growth and development of technology and recording shows an interesting evolution that makes the future difficult for possibly romanticized figures. The pirates discussed earlier were active three hundred years ago, and the only visual culture that recorded the actions of these people were engravings or drawings that accompanied books or pamphlets. The public retains a barrier to the violence and dark sides of piracy. Cowboys enjoy a similar type of distance. There are photographs of cowboys, but these posed prints could not capture the action and violence that occurred in cowboying due to limitations in technology. The public who became obsessed with cowboys would never see a cowboy shooting cattle or fighting Native Americans without a pretense of theatricality that was found in Wild West Shows or later films. This again separates the figure from the more negative attributes. Bank robbers were among the first to become recognizable nationwide, due to numerous film and news reels played at theaters across the country. This new widespread visual culture that became dominant in the 1930s did allow a closer connection to these figures. However, practices and standards of the time again limited how close the public could get to the violence of these figures. The news reels would not show corpses or overt violence. They would mention the death toll, but this lack of visual immediacy maintains a smaller, but still appreciable distance between the public and violence of bank robbers, facilitating romanticization. Combine these technological limitations with the fact that with more time passing the violence of these figures becomes more abstract and difficult to imagine, further allowing romanticization.

These qualities are important, because those limits and barriers are quickly disappearing. With the growth of the internet and the speed at which information and images are dispersed, it becomes more and more difficult for the rough edges, the dark sides, the bare reality of the consequences of people's actions to hide. The concrete effects of violence have especially become impossible to separate from the public conception of individuals and groups. This constant stream of information and near-impossibility to hide the facts hurt possibilities for romanticization. It can absolutely still occur, especially with an increasing distrust of sources of information, but the dark sides of such figures becomes impossible to ignore. If there had been cell phone footage of bank robbers firing Thompson submachine guns at police cars and threatening bank tellers, one can imagine that romanticizing these figures would have been more difficult. In that sense, it is even more difficult to determine who will be the future romanticized figures, as current technology makes it tougher and tougher to hide from the harsh realities and consequences.

Ultimately I am unsure of who will become the romanticized figures in one hundred years, but they will most likely be complex, nuanced historical actors, capable of surprisingly progressive notions as well as decidedly harmful ones. If the other groups are any indication, violence will definitely play a role in their lives. They will also require a time of particular change or confusion, which would mean that we are ripe for such a group to arise. Nevertheless, historical romanticization is a dangerous process. It can highlight positive qualities of groups. This romanticization can also hide more controversial qualities that some would view as positive and some might view as a threat to their power. But most importantly, historical romanticization will always silence

important negative qualities that must not be forgotten. Pirates, cowboys, and bank robbers all have undergone these treatments, and if this project is any sort of indication, they still can capture the imagination for good and for ill.

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