

Scotland's Pirate Havens: Piracy in the Western Isles and Orkneys, 1590-1724

Mark Stanford

When one thinks of pirate havens, they generally think of the rowdy, chaotic wharves and streets in the maritime peripheries of Tortuga, Port Royal, Baratavia Bay, or Madagascar, where pirates caroused and spent their plunder on women and drink, an image that idea. However, these four locales were hardly unique in the early modern Atlantic. Government officials routinely complained about “nests of pirates” and illicit maritime activities in New York, Charles Town and Newport.¹ This included regions without large ports, such as Virginia, where “a nest of [maritime] rogues” could operate.² Nevertheless, even with the recent renewal of maritime history and the increasing interest in pirates and their illicit activities, piracy in the Scottish Highlands has received little scholarly attention.³

Mark Stanford is from Mattoon, Illinois, and earned his BA in history in spring 2014. "Scotland's Pirate Havens: Piracy in the Western Isles and Orkneys, 1590-1724" was written for Dr. Charles Foy's Spring 2013 course, The Golden Age of Piracy. He will begin graduate school in EIU's history MA program in fall 2014.

¹ Mark Hanna, “The pirates’ nest: the impact of piracy on Newport, Rhode Island, and Charles Town, South Carolina, 1670-1740,” Ph. D. diss., Harvard University (2005), 216; Douglas R. Burgess, Jr., “A Crisis of Charter and Right: Piracy and Colonial Resistance in Seventeenth-Century Rhode Island,” *Journal of Social History* (Spring 2012), 610, 612.

² George Francis Dow and John Henry Edmonds, *The Pirates of the New England Coast*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1996), 21.

³ Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “Generational Turns,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 117, no. 3 (Jun., 2012), 806.

The Scottish Highlands, especially the Western Isles and the Orkneys, fit the characteristics of a pirate haven perfectly.⁴ The Western Isles and the Orkneys were located on the periphery of Scotland that had little or no central governmental control; it was an area difficult to navigate and it was easy to hide from authorities among the hundreds of crowded islands, hidden inlets, and bays. It had a native population that was tolerant of, and directly or indirectly involved with, piracy. This essay will show that the Western Isles and the Orkneys were used as pirate havens for an extended period through use of three examples of piracy in the area: Ruairi an Tartair and the MacNeils of Barra, Neil MacLeod, the MacLeods of Lewis and Captain Peter Love, and Captain John Gow.

By 1550, piracy in the area of the Western Isles and the Orkneys had become so prevalent that it caused problems for several European countries. In a letter written to the Queen Dowager of Hungary and Regent of the Low Countries, Ambassador M. d'Eecke warned that something must be done with the pirates in the area who were attacking Dutch fishing vessels since "our people are unable to fish for herring and larger fish except in Scottish waters."⁵ Ambassador d'Eecke claimed that the pirates were "wild Irish" and warned, "that the Scots and Irish will join forces...and the inhabitants of the Hebrides [Western Isles] and Orcades [Orkneys], though subjects of the crown of Scotland, often rebel and prey upon all comers."⁶ The MacNeils of Barra were the most celebrated of the "inhabitants of the Hebrides" that d'Eecke warned against.

⁴ The Western Isles are part of the chain of islands off the northwestern coast of mainland Scotland called the Outer Hebrides; The Orkneys are the chain of islands off the northern coast of mainland Scotland.

⁵ Royall Tyler (editor), "Spain: July 30, 1550," Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Vol. 10: 1550-1552. *British History Online*, [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=88408&strquery=Hebrides pirates](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=88408&strquery=Hebrides%20pirates) (accessed Feb. 19, 2014).

⁶ *Ibid.*

The MacNeils of Barra were the most famous of the Isle pirates, renowned as skilled seamen who “subsisted largely on the plunder which they took at sea, and which they carried off on their predatory excursions into the territories of those neighbouring clans on the mainland.”⁷ The MacNeils turned to piracy out of necessity. With poor agriculture on Barra the MacNeils needed a way to supplement their income, and piracy provided the ideal supplement.⁸ This type of “opportunistic piracy” was not unique to the MacNeils of Barra. During the same time period the Irish O’Malleys and O’Flahertys, under the leadership of Grainne O’ Malley, were supplementing their own struggling, local economies in a similar way.⁹ In the late sixteenth-century, as Grainne O’ Malley terrorized shipping along the coast of Connacht, the MacNeils of Barra’s most famous Chieftain, Ruairi the Turbulent, came into power. Ruairi the Turbulent was a notorious pirate who attacked any ship that sailed close to Barra, regardless of nationality. He was an extremely successful pirate whose cellars were full of fine wines, “and it is supposed that in his stables he kept three pairs of black steeds, whose shoes were made of the gold which he derived from melting down the precious ornaments captured on the high seas.”¹⁰ While golden horseshoes are likely just a legend, the fact that such legends exist is evidence that Ruairi did have a reputation for success. Ruairi’s success, especially against English shipping, was so great that complaints reached the ear of Queen Elizabeth in London. Queen Elizabeth offered a reward for the capture of Ruairi and sent official complaints to King James VI of Scotland, who summoned Ruairi to Edinburgh to face charges of piracy.¹¹ Ruairi, however, ignored the summons and continued his piracy.

⁷ Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, “Hebridean Pirates,” in *Behold the Hebrides*, (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1925), <http://www.electric-scotland.com/books/hebrides2.htm>. (accessed Feb. 19, 2014).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John C. Appleby, “Women and Piracy in Ireland: From Grainne O’ Malley to Anne Bonny,” in *Bandits at Sea A Pirates Reader*, ed. C.R. Pennel (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 285.

¹⁰ MacGregor, “Hebridean Pirates.”

¹¹ Ibid.

What allowed Ruairi and the MacNeils of Barra to defy the governments of both England and Scotland? The answer lies with the Island of Barra itself. Barra was a perfect pirate haven. The island was located in an area of Scotland that had almost no central governmental control. The government in Edinburgh was content with the local Highland chieftains ruling their Clans as they saw fit. The inhabitants of Barra were all active participants in piracy and loyal to Ruairi, who was their clan's chieftain. The final advantage Ruairi held was his stronghold Kisimul Castle, or "Caisteal Chiosmuil", which is Gaelic for the "castle of the rock of the small bay" (see image below).¹² Martin Martin traveled through the Western Isles in the early eighteenth-century, and provided a description of Kisimul Castle, which had changed little since the time of Ruairi an Tartair: "The little Island of lies about a quarter of a mile from the South of this Isle [Barra]...there is a stone wall round it two stories high, reaching the sea, and within the Wall there is an old Tower and a Hall, with other houses about it."¹³

Kisimul Castle was nearly impenetrable. However, Mackenzie Tutor of Kintail captured Ruairi, not through an act of arms, but through trickery. Mackenzie sailed to Kisimul Castle pretending friendship and invited Ruairi onto his ship, while on the ship Mackenzie got Ruairi drunk and captured him.¹⁴ He was taken to Edinburgh and tried on charges of piracy against English shipping. In response to these charges, Ruairi claimed he attacked

¹² "Kisimul Castle," *Historic Scotland*, http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/index/places/propertyresults/propertyabout.htm?PropID=PL_189&PropName=Kisimul%20Castle (accessed Apr. __, 2013).

¹³ Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London: 1703), 91. <http://archive.org/details/descriptionofwes00mart> (accessed April, 2013).

¹⁴ Thomas Maclauchlan, and John Wilson, *A History of the Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments* (Edinburgh: Fullarton, 1875), 164. http://books.google.com/books?id=C1gJAAAIAAJ&pg=PA164&clpg=PA164&dq=Ruari+%E2%80%98the+Turbulent%E2%80%99&source=bl&ots=cQ6xSR0Nba&sig=Xoei3bPHumhLp4wPQdAxf_unik&hl=en&sa=X&ei=mr99UbwzJKXP2QXXjIGYCA&ved=0CEwQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=Ruari%20%E2%80%98the%20Turbulent%E2%80%99&f=false (accessed Apr. __, 2013).

the English ships because “he thought himself bound by his loyalty to avenge, by every means in his power, the fate of his majesty’s mother [Mary Queen of Scots], so cruelly put to death by the queen of England.”¹⁵ It is difficult to say if this was the reason why Ruairi attacked English shipping, since he attacked ships of all nationalities, even fellow Scots. Despite the thinness of Ruairi’s defense, it convinced James VI, who pardoned Ruairi, but still confiscated his land and gave it to Mackenzie Tutor of Kintail. Despite receiving a royal pardon, Ruairi and the MacNeils of Barra returned to pirating, although never to the scale before Ruairi’s capture, as Mackenzie allowed Ruairi to keep his land if he paid a yearly duty.¹⁶ Ruairi’s disobedience was a clear indication of the limits of governmental power to control piracy. Similarly to the early eighteenth century when the central government offered pardons to pirates operating off of Rhode Island, the pardons granted Ruairi and the MacNeils of Barra the ability to re-engage in illicit activities.¹⁷

The MacLeods of Lewis, under their Chieftain Neil MacLeod, also took part in piracy of opportunity, but never on such a grand stage as Ruairi and the MacNeils of Barra. The MacLeods, however, were driven to more extreme forms of piracy by the Scottish government. In the 1590s, with Queen Elizabeth’s death imminent and James VI as the top contender for the throne, James decided to unify his own country, which was split into the Gaelic Highlands and Lowland Scots, before taking the throne of England. James VI had long thought of his Highland subjects with scorn, describing them in his *Basilikon Doron* (1598):

As for the Highlands, I shortly comprehend them all
in two sorts of people: the one that dwelleth in our
main land, that are barbarous for the most part, and

¹⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹⁶ MacLauchlan, *A History of the Scottish Highlands*, 164.

¹⁷ Pardons granted by officers of HMS *Phoenix* in 1718, which were received with “a great deal of Joy” by pirates off Rhode Island did not stop some of the men from proceeding to go “in a boat to the westward with a designing to go a pirating again.” HMS *Phoenix*, Muster Roll, 1714-1739, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom, ADM 51/690.

yet mixed with some show of civility; the other, that dwelleth in the Isles, that are utterly barbarous, without any sort of show of civility.¹⁸

He decided on a plan to eradicate Highland Gaelic culture through colonizing the Isles with Lowland Scots, and the place that was chosen for a pilot test was the Isle of Lewis.¹⁹

In 1597, Parliament passed an act that leased the island to a group of Lowland Scots under the Duke of Lennox called the Fife Adventurers. They were given the authority for “slaughter, mutilation, fire-raising or other inconveniences”—anything necessary to ‘root out the barbarous inhabitants.’”²⁰ However, the “barbarous inhabitants”, the MacLeods of Lewis, were not so easily dislodged from their homes. The MacLeods, under the leadership of Neil MacLeod, constantly harassed and attacked the colonists, besieging them in their fortified settlements, forcing them to rely on supply shipments from the mainland.²¹ This struggle lasted for several years and in 1609, it ended with failure for the Fife Adventurers. Throughout the struggle for possession, Lewis Neil and the MacLeods turned to a focused piracy from their stronghold of Berisay of the western coast of Lewis, constantly attacking the supply ships attempting to reach the colonists.²² It was during this time that the English pirate, Captain Peter Love and his crew of “wicked Impes of the Devill”, arrived on the island.²³ Love and his ship the *Priam* had recently escaped capture off the coast of Ireland and were carrying a rich cargo “consisting of cinnamon, ginger,

¹⁸ Magnus Magnusson, *Scotland: The Story of a Nation* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 406.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 406.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 407.

²¹ Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, “The Fife Adventurers,” in *Behold the Hebrides*, (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1925). <http://www.electric-scotland.com/books/hebrides15.htm> (accessed Feb. 19, 2014).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Robert Pitcairn. *Criminal Trials in Scotland, from A.D. M.CCCC.LXXXVIII to A.D. M.DC.XXIV, Embracing the Entire Reigns of James IV. and V., Mary Queen of Scots and James VI* (Edinburgh: 1833), 100. <http://archive.org/details/criminaltrialsin03bann> (accessed Feb. 19, 2014).

pepper, cochineal, sugar, 700 Indian hides, and twenty pieces of silver plate...a remarkable box, containing various precious stones of great value,” and “a large number of muskets.”²⁴ Neil and the MacLeods were quick to make a mutually beneficial alliance with Love. Neil provided Love and his crew a safe haven, a place for re-provision, and a place to sell their goods, while Love provided the MacLeods a well armed ship to help harass the colonists and goods to buy. The alliance was a weak one based solely on mutual benefit and Neil MacLeod soon believed that Love would benefit him more as a gesture of good faith to the authorities. Neil invited Captain Love and part of his crew to a banquet and while they were feasting, Neil’s men captured the *Priam* from the remaining crew. After a brief fight, Love and his remaining crew were captured.²⁵ Neil sent Love and his captured crew to Edinburgh in hopes of receiving a pardon for himself.²⁶ Captain Love and nine of his crew were tried and found guilty of piracy and sentenced to be “taken to the Gibbet on the Sands of the Leith...and their be hanged until they be dead.”²⁷ Neil MacLeod failed to get his pardon, and after several years of evading the authorities he was captured, tried, and hanged at the Market Cross in Edinburgh in 1613.²⁸

The last major pirate to use the Western Isles and the Orkneys as a haven was Captain John Gow, whose life was described in *A General History of Pirates*. Gow was a native of the Orkneys born in Cariston around 1694 and “had used the Sea many years, Sometimes in Men of War, and Sometimes in Merchant Ships.”²⁹ According to Marcus Rediker, “there were two

²⁴ William Cook Mackenzie, *History of the Outer Hebrides: (Lewis, Harris, North and South Uist, Benbecula, and Barra)* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1903), 249. http://archive.org/details/historyof_outerhe00mackuoft (accessed Feb. 19, 2014).

²⁵ Mackenzie, *History of the Outer Hebrides*, 250.

²⁶ Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, “The Pirate’s Last Stand,” in *Behold the Hebrides*, (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1925). <http://www.electricscotland.com/books/hebrides15.htm> (accessed Feb. 19, 2014).

²⁷ Pitcairn. *Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 101.

²⁸ Alpin MacGregor, “The Pirate’s Last Stand.”

²⁹ Daniel Defoe, *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. by Manuel Schonhorn (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), 358.

fundamental ways of becoming a pirate;” the most common way was for a man to volunteer after his ship had been captured by pirates, the less common way was by mutiny.³⁰ John Gow was one of the few that turned to piracy through a mutiny. In 1725, John Gow led his ship’s crew in a mutiny against their captain because the crew believed their food allowance was insufficient. The mutineers slit the throats of the “surgeon, chief mate, and supercargo...while they where sleeping;” the captain was then attacked by two crewmembers, who cut his throat and stabbed him in the back. The captain was killed when Gow “fired a brace of balls into the captain’s body.”³¹ Following the mutiny, Gow was declared captain and renamed the ship *Revenge* and turned to piracy. After sailing for several years, it was decided by Gow and his crew to return to the Orkneys. According to Defoe, this was because Gow had been courting “a young Gentlewoman” whose father had promised he could marry her when he “could obtain to be Master of a Ship.”³² However, this appeared as an artistic creation of Defoe’s as the account given in the *Newgate Calender* made no mention of a love interest. Instead, it proposed that Gow suggested to his crew that “they might dispose of their effects, and retire, and live on the produce,” and that they might plunder “the houses of the gentlemen residing near the sea-coast.”³³

After arriving in Orkney the pirates spent a short time acting as innocent merchants, and according to *A General History of Pirates*, Gow spent his time courting his love interest. The farce was uncovered after several of the crewmen who were forced to join escaped to shore and revealed the pirates to the authorities.³⁴ The story after the pirates’ discovery, told by both in *A General History*

³⁰ Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 46-47.

³¹ William Jackson, *The New and Complete Newgate Calendar...Containing ... Narratives ...of the Various Executions and Other Exemplary Punishments...in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, from the Year 1700 to the Present Time*, (London: 1795), 182-184.

³² Defoe, *A General History of the Ppyrates*, 363.

³³ Jackson, *The New and Complete Newgate Calendar*, 191-192.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

of *Pirates* and the *Newgate Calender*, agree for the most part. Instead of fleeing, Gow decided to plunder the “house of Mr. Honeyman the high sheriff of the county,” the pirates looted the house taking “linen, plate, and other valuable articles” and forced a bagpiper to play in front of them as they returned to the ship.³⁵ Then, the pirates attempted to plunder the house of a Mr. Fea, but Fea was prepared and captured the men sent to shore, destroyed their boat, and raised the island against the pirates. While Gow was waiting on his ship a storm blew in and the ship ran aground. Without an escape boat, he was forced to surrender to Fea.³⁶ Gow and his crew were taken to Edinburgh, tried and Gow and seven of his crew were found guilty and sentenced to death, while the rest of the crew was acquitted on the terms that they had been forced to become pirates. Gow and his crewmen were hanged on 11 August, 1729.³⁷

The Western Isles and the Orkneys fit the characteristics of a pirate haven perfectly. They were located on the periphery in an area of Scotland that had little or no central governmental control. This allowed men such as Ruairi MacNeil and Neil MacLeod to thrive and support their clans through acts of piracy with little threat of government intervention. However, that periphery began to disappear by the 1720s when Captain John Gow arrived. They were in an area difficult to navigate and easy to hide from authorities within the hundreds of crowded islands, hidden inlets, and bays. This was the reason both Captain Love and Gow sought shelter there. Finally, they had a native population that was tolerant of, directly involved with, or indirectly involved with piracy. This native population of the Isles was beneficial to Ruairi MacNeil, Neil MacLeod, and for a short time Captain Love, since they directly benefited from the piracy. However, the local population was no longer as friendly toward piracy when Captain Gow arrived, as the benefits of supporting piracy had diminished.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 194-195.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 196-198.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 203-204.