

Chapter 4

The Buccaneers



The Buccaneer was a Picturesque Fellow | Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates

ALTHOUGH THE EARLY HISTORY of the buccaneers does not include Harry Morgan, there's little doubt it was his leadership of them from his home base at Port Royal that brought them fame and fortune in their golden era. Except for when Harry led foraging expeditions in the interior of Jamaica to hunt fresh meat for the English army during the early days of the conquest, he was never a cow-killer in the way of the buccaneers. As we will see, his associations with them came later after they had banded together to launch major assaults against Spanish American settlements. Still, given the buccaneers' significance in Morgan's life, we can benefit from, at least, a basic understanding of who these men were.

The term buccaneer came from the French term, *boucanier*, which in turn was derived from the Carib word, *bukan*, meaning the method they used to preserve beef and pork with a combination of heat and smoke and with the use of a minimal amount of salt. Although the French coined the term to refer to hunters (known as "cow-killers") on the island of Hispaniola and Cuba, the English adopted it as, "buccaneer," and much later used it to also refer to the sea-raiders and freebooters of the 17th century Caribbean.

The French continued to use their term, *boucanier*, to refer to the cow-killers; they used the term *flibustiers* when they meant freebooters, sea-raiders, and pirates. The

Dutch term for these was *zeerover* and the Spanish called them *corsarios luteranos* (Lutheran corsairs).

For decades unauthorized settlers had arrived on remote areas of the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola and remained there undisturbed. Spaniards were far more interested in settling on the “Main,” where the prospect of finding, or stealing, gold and silver were far better. Large settlements throughout the Caribbean islands were abandoned, and the domesticated animals once raised there were left to go wild. These newcomers were a mixture of adventurers, runaway apprentices, religious refugees, social outcasts, criminals, and remnants of indigenous Taíno tribes. They were joined by English and French settlers displaced from Saint Christopher and Nevis.

In 1629, a Spanish force had cleared those islands of foreign settlements—Spain still claimed them even though its people had not occupied them for decades. Others came too: former logwood cutters from Campeche,^[1] escaped African slaves, and Irish and Scottish prisoners of war who had been shipped to England’s West Indian colonies by Oliver Cromwell. They were predominantly French with significant numbers of English, Irish, Scottish, and Dutch. Land and food were plentiful. Aside from the fertile soil, there were herds of cattle and pigs that had been brought to the islands by Spanish settlers and had grown under the care of Taínos. As the Spaniards left their farms in favour of towns on the Spanish Main and the Taínos died out, the animals wandered off and became wild.

^[1]*Haematoxylum campechianum*, the logwood tree, is native to southern Mexico and northern Central America. The tree was of great economic importance in the 17th century when Europeans used a purplish-red natural dye obtained from it to dye their fabrics. The state of Belize (formerly British Honduras) evolved from 17th century English logging camps.

We are most interested in the men who settled on Hispaniola, more especially in the northwest third of the island (present-day Haiti) and on nearby Tortuga. *Isla Tortuga* or Turtle Island is a small island off the northwest coast of Hispaniola, just east of the Windward Passage. Those who settled there and planted crops became known as *habitants*, while those who became hunters of feral cattle and hogs were the ones the French called *boucaniers*. Those who went cruising the French called *flibustiers*. Of course, *boucaniers* might sometimes go cruising and therefore become *flibustiers*. And so the two terms eventually became interchangeable to the English who anglicized the term to “buccaneers” and used it to refer to both categories of those early Haitians and Tortugans.

The buccaneers set out on their hunting expeditions in large bands. They carried small tents made of linen, which they pitched wherever they intended to spend the night. When they reached a place suitable to act as a base camp, they erected small sheds of thatched palm leaves. They pitched their tents inside the sheds, which then became their homes throughout the hunting season.

While on the hunt, buccaneers dressed similarly: a coarse shirt, short trousers, and rawhide shoes. Their shirts were very long, and they wore them belted at the waist and outside their trousers, so the garments became black and stiff with bloodstains. On their heads, they wore Spanish-style hats with a broad brim to shade their eyes.

They worked in pairs known as “matelots” or in small teams. They owned everything in common and lived in a surprising degree of harmony, for they placed the common goal of their association above private jealousies or animosities. They developed tight bonds and fierce personal loyalties, some hunting feral cattle exclusively, while others chose to hunt wild boar.^[2] Otherwise, they were alike in all ways.

^[2]Feral domestic pigs start to take on the physical characteristics of wild boar after just one or two generations of being in the wild.

The hunters became skilled marksmen with their long-barreled muskets and were past masters at the use of knives. They treasured the *le fusil boucanier*, a unique matchlock musket made by French gunsmiths, Brachère of Dieppe and Galin of Nientes.



Le fusil boucanier

It measured four and a half feet long and was smooth-bored and broad-butted, with gleaming fittings made of brass. Every buccaneer carried a powder horn, a razor-sharp cutlass—as both a tool and a weapon—and at least one equally sharp knife. Each hunter was accompanied by a small pack of dogs, one or two of which were specifically trained for tracking prey. The hunters also took their own servants with them. Servants shared the same fare and generally worked alongside their masters. However, servants were otherwise treated no better and had no more freedom than was customary for the time, and they were frequently treated with great cruelty.

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