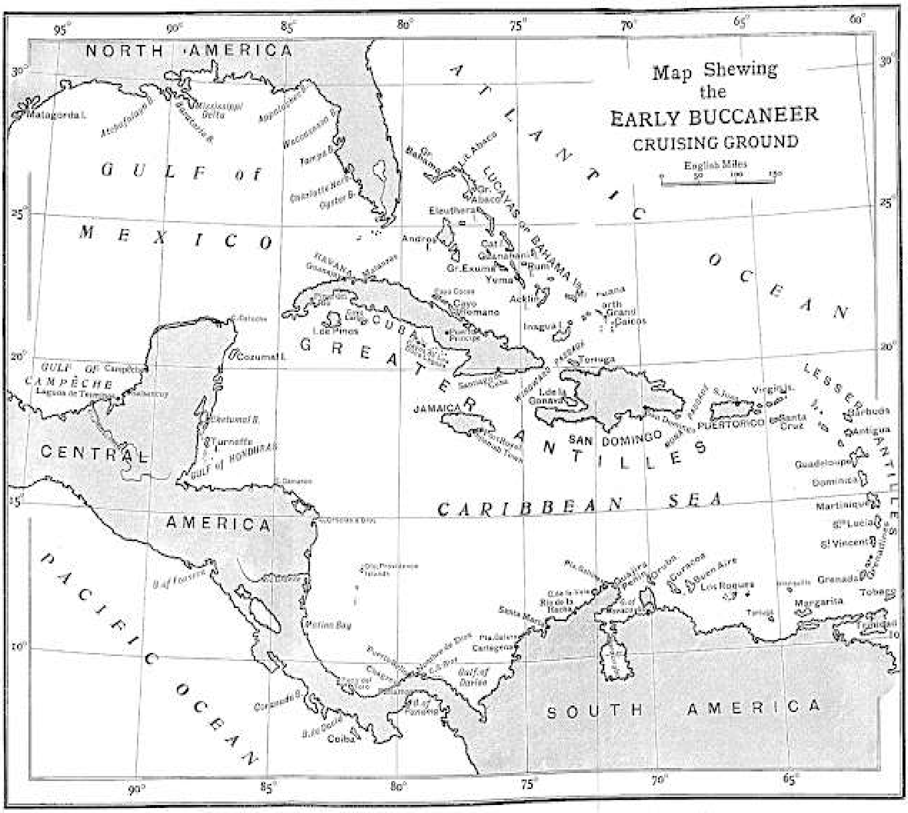

Source: On The Spanish Main by John Masefield | Mathuen & Co., London 1906

I HAVE HAD AN interest in the Welsh-Jamaican hero, Sir Henry Morgan, for decades and have read everything I could find about him and the times during which he lived. Perhaps my interest—fascination is probably more accurate—stemmed from my having lived at the town of Port Royal on the Island of Jamaica when I was a boy. So, over the years, I accumulated reams of notes about Henry Morgan to use in a novel I had intended to write but never did finish. So, rather than waste that research effort, I have decided to use those notes and sources to write a biography of the great man.

To understand the life of Henry Morgan, one needs first to understand the times in which he lived. Seventeenth-century society tolerated far more cruelty than we do now. Torture administered by the state was commonplace. In major English seaports, abductions were everyday occurrences. Forced marriages, once consummated, had the same legal status as those voluntarily entered into. Servants, both slave and indentured, were treated cruelly. Death sentences were handed down for theft, poaching and other relatively minor offences.

That century was one of turbulence with almost continual warfare between European nations. It was a time when Spain still believed she owned the Americas by divine right and was entitled to hang any Englishman who trespassed "beyond the line"—the imaginary line drawn across the globe by Pope Alexander, beyond which none but Spaniards were supposed to venture. In those days, *might indeed was right.*

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I WOULD LIKE TO remind readers that the cost of living was far lower in the seventeenth century than it is today. To fully appreciate the relative value of goods in Henry Morgan's time, one needs to consider what they might be worth today.

According to various sources on the Web, £1 in the year 1660 was equivalent to £134.10 in 2014. In those days, a gentleman or lesser nobleman might expect an annual income of £200 to £300, a clergyman anywhere from £10 to £100 and a yeoman £40 to £60. A skilled worker like a carpenter or stonemason might earn £10 a year. In the mid-to-late-1600s, a sailor in the Royal Navy earned between £10 and £14 annually, depending on his years of experience and might make more depending on the riskiness of the particular voyage. A naval lieutenant of the same era made £96 a year. Naval captains earned between £360 for commanding a first-rate ship of the line and £192 for commanding the much smaller a sixth-rate man-of-war. Prize money, of course, was in addition to this.

> In the mid-1660s, English first-rates generally carried between 90 and 100 guns and at least 400 men. A sixth-rate carried 4–18 guns and 50–79 men.

Readers should note too that, for nearly 400 years, Spanish dollars known as “pieces of eight” were in widespread use throughout the world’s trading routes, including Jamaica where they were legal tender with four pieces of eight worth £1.

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BEFORE HENRY MORGAN’S ERA, England and other nations had long since used the practice of issuing commissions or warrants called “letters-of-marque and reprisal” to private vessels as a way of augmenting their navies in times of war. Commanders who held such warrants, their vessels and the men who crewed them were called privateers. In just that way, Sir Francis Drake obtained a privateer’s commission from Queen Elizabeth I in 1572, which essentially gave him a license to plunder any property belonging to Spain. Without question, properly authorized privateering was within the laws of England and recognized as a legal practice by other European nations. In contrast, piracy was illegal and had been clearly so since the passage of a law (*The Offences at Sea Act 1536, an Act of the Parliament of England*) to that effect during the reign of Henry VIII. The usual penalty for breaching this law was death or transportation. England’s anti-piracy law was regularly enforced by its Lord High Admiral.

In the mid-seventeenth century Caribbean, however, the practice of privateering took on a more ambiguous form—that of “buccaneering.” And nowhere was this practice more adroitly and cynically applied than on the new English colony of Jamaica. Located at the geographical centre of Spanish America, Jamaica was vulnerable to attack from England’s enemies—chiefly, though not solely, the Spanish. And it is doubtful the island could have remained English had it not been for its privately commissioned navy under the command of men like Edward Mansfield (Mansvelt) and Henry Morgan.

From their base at Port Royal, on the southeastern coast of Jamaica, a combination of privateers and buccaneers were often the only navy Jamaica had to place between itself and its enemies. Many officially sanctioned retaliatory raids against Spanish provinces were joint operations manned by both Royal Navy sailors and marines and by privateers and buccaneers. At times, the privateer and buccaneer leader, Edward Mansfield, sailed as second-in-command to the Royal Navy hero, Sir Christopher Myngs. One British colonial administrator and historian, Edward Long, famously wrote in his, *The History of Jamaica* (1774): "It is to the Bucaniers [sic] that we owe the possession of Jamaica at this hour."

It was onto such a stage that young Henry Morgan stepped. And it was there that he outwitted his enemies and became a famous leader of fighting men, a master strategist and a national hero. During his lifetime, in addition to several minor positions, Henry Morgan held the title of knight and the ranks of General and Admiral and he twice served as Lt. Governor of Jamaica, one of England's most prized colonies. It is in my view an oversimplification and gross misinterpretation of history to dismiss him and other early Jamaicans simply as pirates.

Readers should be aware that, although I use the term "buccaneer" throughout this text to refer to those former cow-killers from Hispaniola who led or crewed privateer vessels and armies, it is probable that this term did not come into general English usage until after the English publication in 1684 of John (Alexandre Olivier) Esquemeling's, *The Bucaniers of America*. It is Esquemeling's book that popularized the term in English and made it virtually synonymous with the term "privateer." In their day, it is likely that Jamaican privateer commanders like Sir Henry Morgan would have considered it an insult to be called a buccaneer, which had more of a connotation of "rogue" than they probably would have liked.

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ANYONE WRITING ABOUT THE events of this time faces gaps in documentation, contradictory accounts and some confusion and inconsistency surrounding dates. This is especially true since the seventeenth-century town of Port Royal, Jamaica was substantially destroyed by an earthquake in 1692, along with many historically important state and other legal papers. Accordingly, while I cannot one hundred percent vouch for the chronology and timeframes of my story, I can say with some certainty that the events happened more or less as I describe them.

As to sources, I've tried to keep track of the most important ones and have acknowledged them in the front matter of this book, in footnotes and in the partial bibliography. For the most part, however, I did not save page numbers in the reference notes I have taken over a period of years and on my many visits to libraries. Besides, many of the digitized texts and eBooks I have referenced do not retain page numbers as such. I apologize for any inconvenience this omission causes.

I'd also like to say a few words about dates. While most continental Europeans began using the newer and more accurate Gregorian calendar in 1582, England stuck stubbornly with the old Julian version for another 170 years. The Gregorian calendar added ten days to correct the old version, and it is the Gregorian that we use today. As a result, English records covering much of this story do not coincide with those of other European powers.

Besides that, from the 12th century to 1752, England began the civil or legal year on 25 March rather than 1 January. This led to confusing dating such as "28 February 1654/55," which is in fact 28 February 1655.

I apologize for any errors I have made while trying to sort this out when referencing dates from different sources.

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Finally, let me add that each of us sees the past from a unique perspective. My role, as I see it, is that of researcher and storyteller. As such, I must interpret events, draw inferences from incomplete and conflicting data and sometimes rely on conjecture to present a more coherent—and, hopefully, entertaining—account. And, while I want this biography to be historically accurate, I make no apology for my interpretation of events when faced with gaps in documentation or contradictory accounts, and I am aware some of my views may very well differ from the opinions of others.

R.G.C.
Burlington, ON, Canada
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