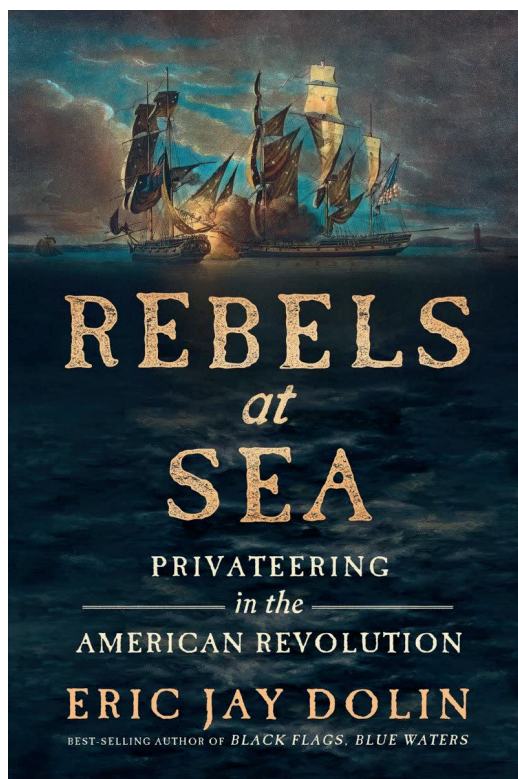


# BOOKSHELF

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**ERIC JAY DOLIN**

**Rebels At Sea. Privateering in the American Revolution**

**W.W. Norton, 2022. 344 Pages,**

**Colour illus. throughout**

**Hardcover, £21.37/\$ 27.06**

**By Sean Kingsley**

**T**he world of American privateers has for too long languished wedged between the thrilling, dastardly deeds of pirates and the heroics of the navy. In his latest book focused on privateering during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), Eric Dolin majestically rectifies the oversight that the official canon of naval history in Britain and the United States virtually ignores privateers.

## WRECKWATCH REVIEW RATING

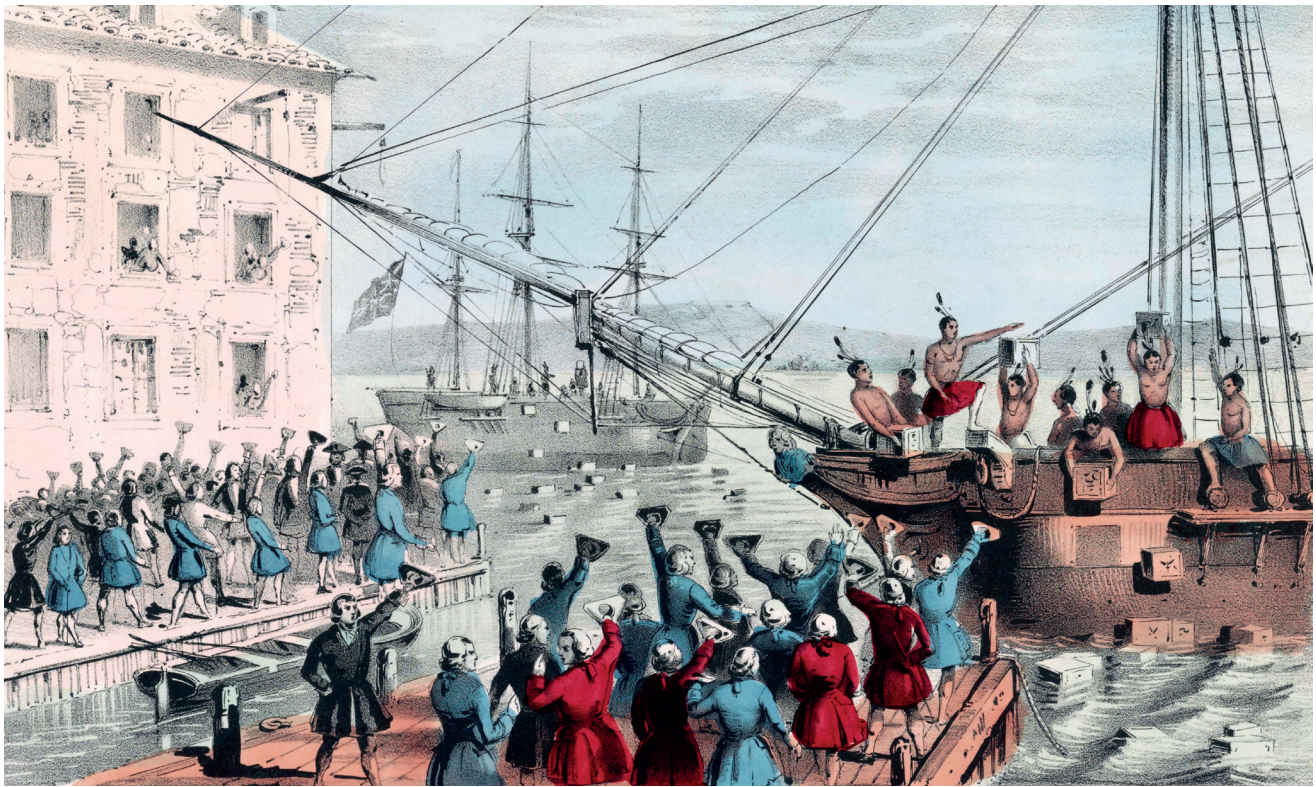
- 5** Turtles = Fantastic, Classic
- 4** Turtles = Impressive, Original
- 3** Turtles = Rock Solid
- 2** Turtles = Tired
- 1** Turtle = Sinking

Dolin successfully shows through people, events and ships how privateering was no sideshow but was critical to winning the war. In the words of John Lehman, the former Secretary of the Navy under President Ronald Reagan, “the battles of the American Revolution were fought on land, and independence was won at sea. For this we have the enormous success of American privateers to thank even more than the Continental Navy.”

“American privateersmen took the maritime fight to the British and made them bleed,” Eric Dolin explains. In countless daring actions against British merchant ships, and even warships, privateers pushed British maritime insurance rates sky-high and diverted critical British resources and naval assets away from protecting their vessels to attacking privateers. Privateers also played a starring role in forcing France into the war on the side of the US, a key turning point in the conflict.

On the domestic front, privateering brought welcome goods and military supplies into the new nation, provided cash injections for the war effort, boosted coastal economies through the building, outfitting and manning of privateers and “bolstered America’s confidence that it might succeed in its seemingly quixotic attempt to defeat the most powerful military force of the day.”

To many confused ways of thinking, privateers are misunderstood as little better than pirates chasing ill-gotten gains for personal greed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Privateers were armed ships owned and outfitted by private individuals



The destruction of tea in Boston harbour, Sarony & Major (1846). Photo: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-03379.

with government backing to capture enemy ships in times of war. These permits were called letters of marque, formal legal documents issued by the government that gave the bearer the right to seize ships belonging to belligerent nations and claim vessels and cargoes, lock, stock and smoking barrels, as spoils of war.

These prizes were auctioned off at port and their proceeds split between a ship owner and his crew. By attacking the enemy's maritime commerce and naval forces, privateers inflicted major economic and military pain at no expense to the government. "Privateers were like a cost-free navy," Eric Dolin writes, or "the militia of the sea."

The Library of Congress's Naval Records of the American Revolution lists 1,697 armed vessels, armed with 14,872 cannon and crewed by 58,400 men, as being issued with letters of marque in the course of the war. American privateers seized an estimated 1,600 to 1,800 prizes, inflicting a minimum of between \$1.4 and \$1.6 billion of damage (in modern value) on Britain's war economy in terms of ships and cargoes seized from the stream of commerce, Dolin calculates. Massachusetts launched the largest number of privateers at around 600, followed

by Pennsylvania (some 500) and then Connecticut and Maryland (about 200 each). Rhode Island was home to nearly 150, and Virginia and New Hampshire well below 100.

Massachusetts had been an especially rebellious thorn in Britain's side for many years and was infamous as "the metropolis of sedition," partly reacting to the British Royal Navy's tendency to raid the region for impressed sailors. The parent struck the child hard during the war in the belief that if the "rabble-rousers in Massachusetts could be crushed any further, resistance would be squelched (a premise that proved to be woefully misguided)," Dolin writes.

The Boston Port Act of 1 June 1774 initiated a naval blockade of Massachusetts, which was followed by the New England Restraining Act or New England Trade and Fisheries Act from 1 July 1775, that schemed to starve New England by restricting the trade of its colonies to Great Britain, Ireland and the British West Indies. The act also banned the colonists from fishing anywhere in the North Atlantic Ocean.

By an Act of 1 November 1775, Massachusetts was lawfully free to unleash privateering hell in the colonies. Around 40 years later, John Adams felt that the impact of the privateers was so profound

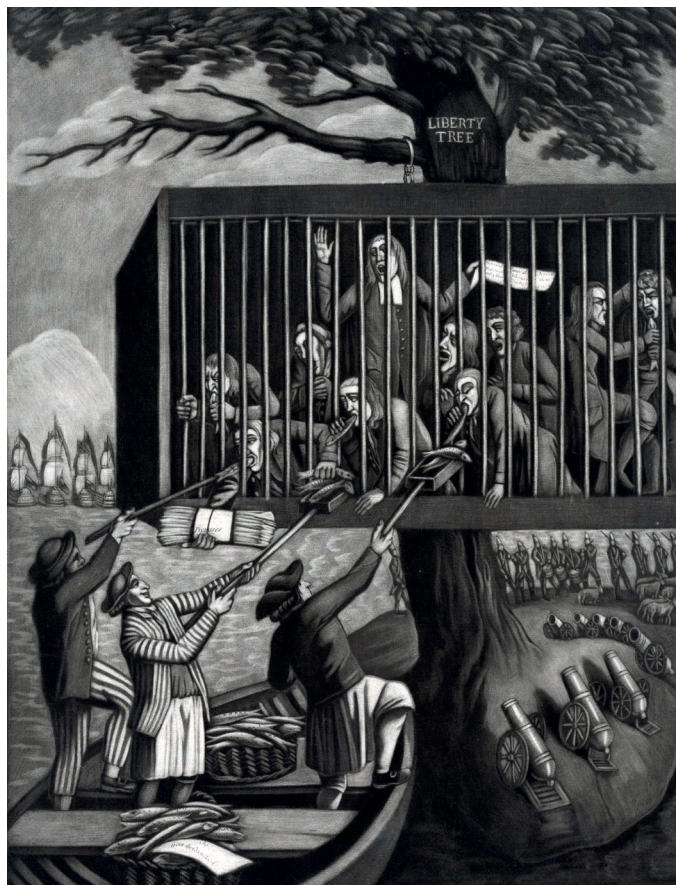


that "The declaration of independence is a brimborion [a trifle of little value] in comparison with it."

When the Massachusetts privateer Jonathan Haraden, who took many prizes and seized hundreds of British cannon and prisoners, died of tuberculosis aged 59 in November 1803, he was celebrated as a man of "wonderful triumphs," "consummate courage and severe intrepidity," "a perfect hero" entitled "to a place in history by the side of John Paul Jones." A legacy equal to the legendary naval officer was no mean feat.

Despite the reality that privateers were licensed to plunder, there were similarities to pirates in the way ships fought and crews behaved. Like on most pirate ships, where weeks and months of monotony were cut by the short-lived sniff of the hunt, life onboard a privateer was pretty dull, Dolin explains. Watches scanned the horizon for enemy craft, the crew practiced attacks – cannon had to be kept clean and ready to blast – and meals were made up of beef, pork and beans and salted fish, topped up by fresh fish. "Rotten meat and vegetables, as well as bread riddled with weevils, were relatively common" Dolin explains.

As on pirate ships, privateers too flew no single flag during the Revolution. Many identified themselves by their colony of origin first and foremost. Ships from Massachusetts Bay flew a pine tree with the words 'Appeal the Heaven' and South Carolina a rattlesnake. And like pirates, who held no reservations about cunningly flying the flags of enemies to sneak up to their prey, privateers like the 115-ton



Bostonians held captive in a cage suspended from the Liberty Tree near Boston Common on 19 November 1774 was a rallying point for colonists' resistance against British laws & actions. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-11139.

*Hancock* from Philadelphia felt no dishonour in rigging up a British flag when it saw the 600-ton English trader the *Reward* heading from Tortola for London. Privateers in port after a successful cruise of course spent their money recklessly on drinks and entertainment. The sailor's creed across the board was piratical: "what I had I got, what I spent I saved, and what I kept I lost."

The structure of command was the greatest difference between privateers and pirates. While sea bandits voted captains in and out of position in a surprisingly democratic way, the captain with a fixed position was the ultimate authority on a privateer.

American privateers set out from Annapolis, Baltimore, Boston, Little Egg Harbor, Newburyport, New London and other ports to sail the Atlantic in search of prey, travelling from Nova Scotia to the West Indies and from the North Sea to Africa. Their aims and exploits made them central to the American Revolution. By the time the end of the war was signed on 3 September 1783 at the Treaty of Paris, privateering had turned into one of America's top industries. What George Washington called an American victory that "was little short of a standing miracle" was achieved with the major support of little-known captains and crews who stepped up to make the idea of a United States a reality.

Eric Dolin's *Rebels At Sea* is original, meticulously researched and connects one of the USA's great missing links in understanding how the land of the free earned its liberty. *Rebels At Sea* is rich in stories, historical explanation and tales of derring-do – a new and refreshing take on how the West was won.

## LEAPING THE DRAGON GATE 鯉躍龍門



THE SIR MICHAEL BUTLER COLLECTION  
OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY  
CHINESE PORCELAIN



**TERESA CANEPA & KATHARINE BUTLER**  
**Leaping the Dragon Gate. The Sir Michael Butler Collection of 17th-Century Chinese Porcelain**  
**Ad Ilisvm, November 2021. 576 pages,**  
**850 colour illus., English & Chinese**  
**Hardback, £175**  
**By Sean Kingsley**

**L**eaping the Dragon Gate is a dizzyingly ambitious book that catalogues and contextualizes over 800 pieces of Chinese porcelain acquired by the passionate collector the late Sir Michael Butler since 1961. Sir Michael didn't just have an exceptional eye – he once found a Red Cliffs square vase with a Kanxgi Emperor reign mark being used as an umbrella stand in a bric-à-brac shop in Dorset – he developed a trailblazing understanding of the porcelain art of Jingdezhen in what for ages was seen as the unfashionable 17th century.

In an era when fashions focused on the “fetish” of buying ceramics made for the imperial court, epitomized by Sir Percival David's dazzling collection in the British Museum, assembled in the 1920s to 1930s,

Sir Michael embraced the skills of private kilns. This interest was modernistic in outlook: even in China, non-imperial wares were dismissed until very recently as “people's wares”, *minyao*.

Private kilns increased in importance as the 17th century unfolded and Imperial kilns turned off the fires as the Ming Dynasty wound down. Free from official control, skilled potters and painters experimented with a wide variety of porcelain for many different customers. These included the home market of non-imperial patrons drawn from literati-gentleman and wealthy merchants. A significant amount of the output was destined for Japan, Southeast Asia and the Dutch Republic.

Starting at the end of the Emperor Longqing's reign from 1567, China's sea gates were opened for licensed private trade with any country. The West's soaring love of blue-and-white porcelain began. So-called ‘kraak’ porcelain fired in at least 13 private kilns in Jingdezhen was produced in vast quantities in underglaze blue in a free and spontaneous style, almost exclusively for the export market. Special orders were placed by the Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and Germany. Even products that are sometimes dismissed as inferior passed through 72 different processes before being turned into a cup, according to the 1637 book *Tiangong Kaiwu*.

The 17th-century wares that Sir Michael Butler and his collection illuminate are part of the epic story that saw Jingdezhen blue-and-white encircle the world, and its cargoes sink en route on Chinese, Spanish,



Porcelain pot from the Hatcher wreck, c. 1643, H. 20.0 cm. Photo: courtesy of Katharine Butler.





Left: High Transitional porcelain vase, dated to 1638, H. 45.5cm. Centre: *rolwagen* porcelain vase, Shunzhi reign (1644-61), H. 48cm. Right: High Transitional brush-pot, Chongzhen reign (1628-44), H. 22.5cm. Photos: courtesy of Katharine Butler.

Portuguese and Ottoman ships between the Middle Kingdom and the East Mediterranean. The *Maravillas* Spanish galleon wrecked off The Bahamas in 1656 and being explored by Allen Exploration also carried Chinese porcelain on its fateful final voyage, presumably as officers' and passengers' chosen table wares.

*Leaping the Dragon Gate* presents the history of Sir Michael Butler's collection, how it was assembled and the thinking behind its creation. The major part of the book then drills into the artistic and commercial

development of the kilns' output in the Late Ming, High Transitional era and during the reigns of the early Qing emperors Shunzhi (ruled 1643-1661) and Kangxi (1661-1722), and catalogues the collection (in both English and Chinese).

At 576 pages in length, and with 850 colour photos, this exceptional book is beyond seminal – a collectors piece in its own right. It is an epic reference tool for art historians and archaeologists seeking to understand the evolution of shapes and decoration that often endured over time and re-emerged in flattery of former periods. Ultimately, Sir Michael's exquisite taste and fascinating collection perfectly captures how China's blue-and-white porcelain made in Jingdezhen became the most famous and enduring brand in the world.

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Below & Right: Sir Michael Butler in his museum & with select pieces from his Chinese porcelain collection. Photos: courtesy of Katharine Butler.

