

## “The Gold of Billy One-Hand”

In the course of three expeditions to Ile Ste. Marie on the northeast coast of Madagascar during 1999-2000, underwater explorer Barry Clifford and his Project Team discovered a number of pirate shipwrecks—including, most notably, that of the *Adventure Galley*, flagship of Captain William Kidd, perhaps the most famous pirate in history.

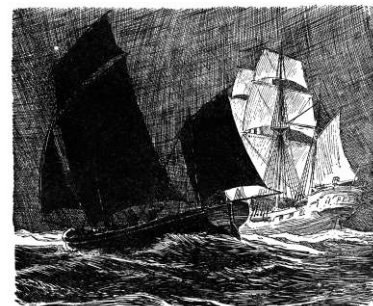


The excitement surrounding this discovery has somewhat obscured some of the Team’s other accomplishments—for example, the discovery of the nearby wreck site of the pirate ship *Fiery Dragon*.

Known as “Condent”, “Congdon”, “Connor”, “Condell”—and with first names running the gamut from “Christopher”, “Edmond”, “John” to “William”—enough uncertainty exists as to this brigand’s real name to justify the fond nickname of “Billy One-Hand” among modern “piratologists”. He and his men were an unusually hard-bitten pack of sea-wolves who ran up a long string of daring robberies.

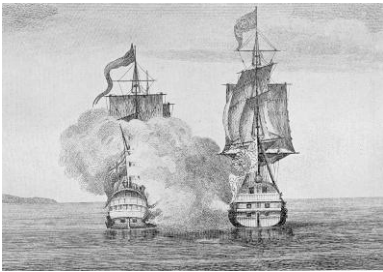
Anticipating the arrival of British warships at the Bahamas in February of 1718, Condon and 98 other rough “old Standers”—all veterans of other pirate crews—banded together and left Nassau in a heavily-armed sloop named *The Dragon*. Shortly after, an irate crewmember barricaded himself in the hold; threatening to ignite the powder magazine in revenge for a beating he had received. Some advised prying up deck planks and tossing down grenades to flush him out, but Condon leaped straightway into the hold with a pistol in one hand and a cutlass in the other. Condon’s arm was broken by a bullet from the darkness, but he returned fire and the mutineer died.

After enduring amputation of his arm, Condon was promoted from quartermaster to captain for his bravery. After a short spell of robbery through the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean, the crew voted for the shores of West Africa. Setting sail for the Cape de Verdes, Condon took a British merchant ship, the *Alexander* in mid-March, laden with wine from Madeira, which was plundered and mounted with 22



guns. From various other prizes some forty disgruntled merchant seamen had already joined the gang.

Billy had plenty of sympathy for such men. Life aboard a merchant ship was miserable at best in those days, and the lot of seamen raking salt on Cape Verdean tidal flats under an equatorial sun was particularly hard. After taking some twenty more vessels in one fell swoop at those islands, Condon “took upon him the Administration of Justice, enquiring into the Manner of the Commanders’ Behaviour to their Men, and those, against whom Complaint was made, he whipp’d and pickled” [=doused with seawater].



At St. Jago in the islands, a large Dutch ship was spotted. Though seriously overmatched, “Billy One-Hand” promptly came alongside, “poured in a devastating broadside, “laid her aboard”, and took her without further ado. Naming this ship *The Flying Dragon*, Condon took her over for his own, releasing both the *Alexander* and his old sloop *The Dragon*. He

then ranged both sides of the South Atlantic; sweeping the seas clear of English, French, Portuguese and Dutch shipping.

Not all victims were looted. One such was John Spelt, commander of a slave trader called *The Wright Galley*. Spelt, like Condon, was from Plymouth (as was Sam Bellamy, pirate captain of the *Whydah*), and although Condon kept *The Wright Galley* in company for weeks, he treated his fellow townsman “very civilly” presenting him with sundry stolen goods as amends for his trouble.

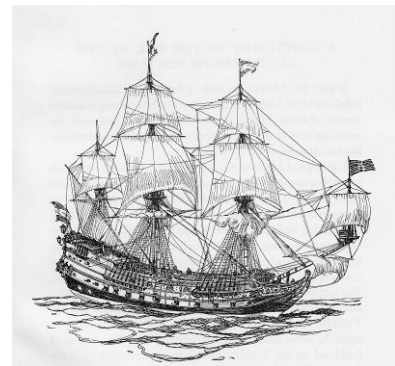
Not so lucky was a Dutch East-Indiaman of 26 guns. Condon’s gunnery was up to its usual standard; the Dutch captain was killed in the first broadside, and the ship easily taken. After careening *The Flying Dragon* at Ferdinando, Condon released Spelt and the Dutch; with the latter being ordered to remain 24 hours after his departure--with the ferocious threat that they’d all be put to the sword, if they again fell into his hands.

Off Brazil, the pirates happened upon a Portuguese man-o-war of seventy guns. When the Portuguese hailed the rovers, back came the answer that they were a slaveship out of London bound for Buenos Aires. Fooled, the Portuguese manned their shrouds for a complimentary cheer. As *The Flying Dragon* passed, she suddenly erupted with cannon and small-arms fire. After a ninety-minute duel, Condon casually sailed off unscathed--having killed over forty men in the warship.

Continuing southward, he took *La Dauphine*, a French ship of 18 guns laden with wine and brandy, which he carried with him into the River Plate for a leisurely plundering toward the end of 1718. While hunting wild cattle ashore, some of his men were captured by the crew of a Spanish man-of-war, but talked fast and managed to get themselves released

Hearing that some shipwrecked pirates had been lately executed in Brazil, Condon's crew reportedly retaliated by thereafter treating all Portuguese captives "very barbarously, cutting off their Ears and Noses". He then recrossed the Atlantic and took *The Indian Queen*, Captain Hill, off the coast of Guinea.

At Luengo Bay on the southwest coast of Africa, a Dutchman of 44 guns and the English ship *Fame* were sighted at anchor. As the pirates approached, both ships cut their cables and ran themselves ashore, *The Fame* was wrecked, but the marauders managed to refloat the Dutchman. Staying true to their dragon totem, the pirates took this vessel over as *The Fiery Dragon*. Like her namesake, she had teeth. She was fitted with forty cannon, 20 brass swivel guns, and even three man-portable cohorn mortars which could lob exploding shells onto the decks of opposing ships. With a reported crew of 320 men, and small arms for twice that number, she was as well-manned as she was well-armed.



In late October or early November 1719, the *Georges* was taken off the west coast of South Africa, and, a month or two later, Condon looted the *Prince Eugene* as she sailed below the Cape of Good Hope.

The next victim came off the Cape of Good Hope in February 1720 in the form of the twenty-four gun, four-hundred ton, *Maison d'Autriche* ("The House of Austria"), homeward bound to Ostend (in modern Belgium) from Canton, China. Her captain, a former English East India commander



named James Nash, readily turned over a hidden parcel of gold and other valuable cargo to his captors and was released relatively unscathed. This capture is reflected by the recovery of porcelain from the wreck site of *The Fiery Dragon* with the double-headed eagle design of the Hapsburgs who then ruled what is now Belgium.

After taking yet another Dutch East-Indiaman, the marauders then made for Madagascar. In those days, St. Mary's island--off Madagascar's northeast coast--held a high reputation as a haven for villainy. It was a place from which to stage attacks against the incredibly rich pilgrim ships sailing between India and Arabia. At this "pirates' paradise", Condon recruited among the local population of hardened career pirates as well as local blacks. Most pirates welcomed black recruits, and depended on the friendship of these islanders for both re-supply and sanctuary. "Billy One-Hand" was no exception. As he left port on the southwest monsoon to attack the rich pilgrim ships traveling between India and Arabia, he even left behind a letter advising passing ships that "they should use the Blacks kindly or he would be reveng'd of them".

Near Bombay on August 18, 1720, the raiders found exactly what they were looking for--a five hundred ton Turkish-owned pilgrim ship homeward bound for Surat from the port of Jiddah in Arabia. The passengers and crew wisely offered no resistance and were safely put ashore at Malabar hill near Surat. This was a fabulously wealthy prize laden with gold coins, drugs, spices (such as frankincense, saffron, and myrrh), calicos, and silks "worth Twelve Lakh of Rupees"--perhaps as much as 150,000 English pounds sterling (estimated at roughly \$375 million in today's buying power). Given that just *two* pounds sterling were an ordinary sailor's pay for an entire month, Condon's crew were no doubt contemplating an extremely pleasant retirement as they returned to their base at St. Mary's on the northeast monsoon.

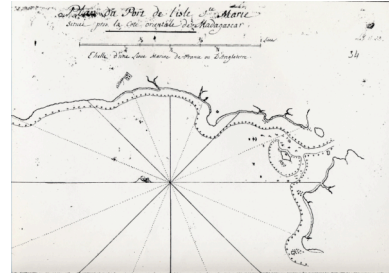
During the 17th and 18th centuries, piracy flourished with aid and comfort from dishonest merchants and politicians. Pirates often bought firearms, gunpowder and liquor at ridiculously *high* prices--for which they paid with stolen goods at ridiculously *low* valuations, or even in good hard cash. And so many a blood-stained piece-of-eight was rubbed clean in the silk pocket of a corrupt merchant.

In the fall of 1719 at least five vessels had sailed for the Indian Ocean to trade with pirates and/or to break the East India Company's trade monopoly in those seas. These ships were freighted with liquor, arms, ammunition and goods for the slave trade. Thus it was that *The Coker Snow* of London arrived at St. Mary's in October 1720. Although her captain was one Richard Taylor, she was under temporary command of a Captain Henry Baker. The vessel had already spent some two and a half months buying slaves and trading with small-time pirates on Madagascar, but now they were about to join the big leagues.

Baker and Taylor were ashore trading when, on October 13th, they spotted two large vessels working their way into the port. They hoisted sail, but

were unable to clear the harbor in time. Their visitors proved to be *The Fiery Dragon* and her prize.

After getting an account of the *Coker's* cargo, Condon took out 500 gallons of wine and other liquor which, however, he was very careful to pay for. Although the desperadoes had made their fortune, they needed legal sanctuary in order to retire comfortably. The best way to obtain such in those days was to bribe a corrupt governor to issue a pardon and the *Coker* represented a conduit to just such a governor. The pirates had heard that Governor Joseph Beauvillier de Courchant of the French island of Ile Bourbon (modern Reunion) was offering pardons to any pirate giving up his trade. While many of the *Fiery Dragon* pirates opted to settle on St. Mary's, or elsewhere on Madagascar, Condon and others voted on October 16 to send Baker and five men to Reunion Island to investigate the matter--while keeping Captain Taylor and five of his merchant crewmen as hostages.



The *Coker* dropped anchor off Reunion on November 12, 1720 and Captain Baker transmitted the pirates' request for a pardon. The governor was more than happy to oblige; he was under orders from Versailles to make every attempt to persuade pirate to surrender and give up their nefarious trade. De Courchant convened the provincial council, and, with their advice, drew up a proposal for Condon and the pirate company. They were to surrender themselves, their weapons, and their ammunition to the authorities at Reunion within four months, and to surrender or destroy their warships. In return, each pirate would receive a pardon, and, with the payment of a small fee, the right to settle on the island. Each of the pirates could also bring in one negro slave--provided that these were not "warriors" who had fought side-by-side with the pirates. This was to eventually cause trouble, as there were 60 blacks among the crew in addition to the 135 pirates who had requested the pardon.

The only opponents of the plan were missionaries of the Lazarist order who quite reasonably pointed out that the pirates were being allowed to enjoy the fruits of sin scot-free. Versailles, however, took up a much more pragmatic attitude; the Lazarists were characterized as "troublemakers" and de Courchant was ordered to exclude them from the island's governing council. The French East India Company advised him that marriage would undoubtedly be the best means of taming the buccaneers and forestalling their return to old habits.

In the interim, another merchant trader, the *Prince Eugene* of Bristol, Joseph Stratton commander, had arrived at St. Mary's on October 26.



After some negotiation, an amicable agreement for sale of her cargo to the pirates, at a 500% mark-up, was reached. After it was sealed with a complimentary boatload of brandy, things got so “amicable” that Stratton and Condon were seen drinking together side-by-side under a tree. In this sort of atmosphere, the merchant crewmen were prone to all manner of wild speculation; among whom ran the rumor that each of the pirate crewmen had eight or nine thousand pounds sterling as his share of the loot.

Despite the conviviality, the *Prince Eugene* wasted no time and departed on November 4.

The hasty departure may have been due to Stratton’s exploitation of mathematically-challenged marauders. The befuddled buccaneers had ended up paying 9000 pounds sterling for a cargo valued at 1500 pounds sterling, or a mark-up of 600%.

If the pirates ever figured out the fraud, they soon had cause to forget in any case. The *Gascoigne* of Bristol--yet another illegal trader--arrived the same day the *Prince Eugene* departed. Captain Chaloner Williams sold the rovers six firearms, a keg each of powder and shot; and 120 more gallons of brandy--which undoubtedly helped keep the pirates’ retirement party going strong!

The *Coker* returned to St. Mary’s on November 26 with the “Act of Grace” from Reunion, but the pirates were taking no chances and demanded that she go back for a special “Act of Indemnity”. They all remembered the fate of those among Kidd’s crew who had surrendered under a general pardon--only to be hanged later under a technicality--and so they wanted to make sure their agreement was ironclad. The *Coker* accordingly set forth again to Reunion, obtained the desired Act—with which she finally returned on December 27. When the matter was then put to the men for a vote, forty-three agreed to accept the pardon while forty men decided to take their chances at St. Mary’s; the remainder had already shipped out for England on the *Prince Eugene* and the *Gascoigne*, or had fled by boat across the narrow strait to the main island of Madagascar.

According to the agreement, the pirate ships were to be surrendered to the French authorities. Many of the pirates were disabled by sickness, however, and there weren’t enough hands to man both vessels. To prevent the “irreconcilables” from jeopardizing the indemnity deal by a return to piracy, both ships were destroyed. For years thereafter, drugs, spices and chinaware were seen lying in heaps on the beach exposed to wind and weather. The location of *The Fiery Dragon* and her prize, however,

remained unknown until the recent discovery of *The Fiery Dragon* by Barry Clifford's archaeological exploration team under the auspices of **Discovery Communications** and the Malagasy government.

For their passage each of the thirty-two white pirates deciding to surrender promised to pay "50 pounds sterling and a slave", and on January 9, 1721, the *Coker* sailed with its cargo of "retirees" for Reunion. To ensure that the island would provide a suitable welcome to its new settlers, de Courchant issued a decree on January 10, 1721 regulating how much the inhabitants could charge the former pirates for food and housing. In return for a payment of fifteen piasters a month, each man was guaranteed a dwelling without leaks as well as a sturdy mattress, a pillow, and a blanket. His host was to provide a half a bottle of the local brew as well as soup and meat--either boiled or roasted--on all but fast days.

Upon the safe arrival of the vessel at Reunion, there was, as could have been expected, trouble regarding payment to the *Coker*. The pirates appealed to the governor regarding the terms of the passage. The governor settled the dispute by compelling the pirates to pay the passage money to Baker, but not the "slaves"--who convinced the governor that they were indeed "warriors" and full-fledged members of the crew. Stratton was not the only one who knew how to drive a sharp bargain!

The pirates were warmly welcomed by the residents of Reunion and, in the style of Errol Flynn and other big-screen buccaneers, "Billy One-Hand" lived "happily ever after". Shortly after his arrival, he was even asked to negotiate the release of the Portuguese Vice-Roy of Goa who had been taken by the pirates Taylor and La Buze ("the Buzzard") in April 1722. Condon was successful in mediating a ransom, and the pirates left without looting the island. The islanders were extraordinarily grateful and did everything they could to make the pirates welcome. "Billy One-Hand" is even said to have married the Governor's sister-in-law. Nevertheless, some twenty of the pirates, apparently "homesick", went back to Europe in November 1722, and Condon followed them a year later. He settled on the Normandy coast in France where he became a thriving merchant and shipowner known locally for his "honor and probity".

#### *Afterward*

While the discovery and identification of *The Adventure Galley* wreck site is clearly the most historically-significant accomplishment of Barry Clifford's team at Ste. Marie to date, *The Fiery Dragon* wreck site will ultimately prove to be more fruitful from a strictly archaeological standpoint. As can be seen in the summary above, this pirate crew's robberies were far more numerous and extensive than were those of

Kidd's crew. In fact, this treasure-trove of artifacts is completely unprecedented insofar as the potential range of cross-cultural materials is concerned. Given the historical circumstances of the abandonment of the two vessels, it can also be confidently expected that the quantity of artifacts on *The Fiery Dragon* site will be much larger than on the *Adventure Galley* site.

Similarly, while Kidd's story contains a high level of drama and human interest, Condon was clearly "a pirate's pirate" more akin to Samuel Bellamy of *The Whydah Galley*—who, ironically, came from Condon's hometown of Plymouth England. Unlike Kidd, who was essentially appointed by a group of investors, Condon was popularly elected by his crew. Condon, unlike Kidd, was clearly not afraid to take chances, or engage in combat with opponents of equal--or greater--strength. While Kidd's crew was organized hierarchically, Condon's was far more democratic and egalitarian. While Condon welcomed and defended blacks among his crew, Kidd is known to have been a slave-holder. While Kidd was ill-tempered and blustering, Condon was able to negotiate well between differing factions of his crew as well as with outsiders.