
'TIS THE SEASON

This is the season of lists. Some look cautiously forward yet nonetheless depict the advent of a multipolar world in which the West will face increased challenges from the combined power economies of a still emerging regional hegemon known in certain circles as *Chindia*. (1)

Other lists have surveyed a waning year filled with financial crises and mounting negative economic news only to find a considerable degree of light in our growing penchant for healthy choices, such as pomegranate and blueberry juice, along with an equally increased taste for a new, but not necessarily quite as healthy a drink, a much advertised lemon-flavored, alcoholic malt beverage.

Additional commonalities can be found in annual global search engine reviews which indicate that in Italy and in France YouTube was the most popular choice, in Germany eBay, and in the Netherlands it was Hyves.net, a social networking site. Selections appeared more focused at the local level, as in New York, where analyses of millions of aggregate search inquiries revealed a definite inquisitiveness about CERN, the European particle accelerator that lies behind a supercollider whose first run, though admittedly incomplete, fortunately failed to bring about the activation of the immense black hole that many onlookers around the world had feared.

In 2008 the process of looking backward became less the theme of a long-lost utopian novel from the 1880's and more of modern resurrection science's continuing quest to bring back a list of extinct mammalian species, such as the Mastodon, this in spite of understandable debates about whether the animal, once so sought after by our limited number of Holocene ancestors, might not be able to survive given substantial differences in our contemporary ecology and densely populated human social organizations.

Rare books had their lists as well. John Smith's "A Description of New-England" in the year 1614 is featured on at least one of these, a summary of his travels to the then northeastern wilderness of America where he encouraged the founding of a sustained settlement that would require hard work and diligence in order to profit from its obvious richness. This endeavor would stand in contrast to the Spanish whose colonizing efforts, he maintained, were based largely on looting and pillaging, and on a distinct impetus for homeward voyages following a series of speedily acquired monetary rewards

Stretching forward from the more immediate past into 2008 is a complete guide to pirates and piracy, a type of enlarged printed list expertly modeled after introductions to problematic desktop PCs, and designed for ready reference for those unable or unwilling to spend time with telephone tech support staffs.(2) In and among the guide's pages one will find sufficient attention to looting and pillaging, at least enough to overcome any swashbuckling or romantic image of the pirate's practice, and certainly enough to reinforce the notion that contemporary events off the coast of Somalia that avoid legal restriction and interpretation are not a new or unanticipated characteristic of the maritime experience.

We also discover that the disruptive mayhem that continues to accompany piracy charted a course parallel to the rise and decline of coastal states and geopolitical empires, acted realistically in its aversion to attacking heavily armed vessels, and sometimes preyed on merchant ships while, at other times, crafted lucrative deals with leaders on land that resulted not only in safer waters for colonial trade routes, but also in the considerable acquisition of wealth on the part of the individuals concerned. Similarly parallel to the lawful society was illegal piracy's strenuous sense of brotherhood within which, however, there was a definite social hierarchy that graded upward from impressed sailors and cabin boys to kidnapped surgeons, carpenters, and unfortunate but skilled former passengers of other ships, to the master gunner, the navigator, and finally to the captain, often elected to office by majority vote.

An infraction of a ship's rules usually brought swift sanction. This was true even for the many who willingly joined an expansionary pirate brotherhood that encompassed escaped convicts, shipwreck survivors, desperate farmers without inherited landholdings, and the urban poor seeking wealth and adventure -- for these the worst of the sanctions was to be left behind in the blistering sunlight on the shores of an otherwise unknown and tiny island to await the inevitable slow march of high tide. But elsewhere on land that was familiar to merchants and cartographers alike lay settlements where illegal trade and profits were more than welcome, safe-havens in which the pirates, as if to flaunt customary society, dressed like the gentlemen of their day and, in some cases, went on to invest personal gains in legitimate holdings in the hope of launching a successful shift in identity from seaworthy outlaw to financial dynastic founder.

Besides the buying and selling of illegal goods, what all pirates had in common was an attachment to an informal brand of group governance within, and a pronounced lack of loyalty to legitimate governments without. Theirs was a heady cross-border world that exchanged and interacted fiercely with globalizing enterprises and reached a Golden Age in the early 18th century only to sink and rise again along with state devolution and a seemingly unenforceable patchwork of interlocking land and sea-based regulatory frameworks that continue to remain linked to cycles of international trade's busts and booms. |

We may look forward to the appearance of an additional complete guide that can conveniently tie this relatively small segment of a globalizing economy to the broader, complicated, and confusing, contemporary whole.

Next year will see the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The early 19th century vessel on which the physician turned naturalist set sail, HMS Beagle, was reportedly never in danger from his era's marauding pirate crews, and his subsequent collections forged the conclusion that despite our seeming diversity, we are all related to common roots. No one can really predict the future. But a clarifying guidebook may act to enlighten the current sense of gloom and uncertainty, and help transform the coming year, 2009, into another *annus mirabilis*.

(1) Lists, all appearing online in 2008, are "Weakened, But Still Going Strong," The Indian Express; Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World, Atlantic Council of the United States; Google Zeitgeist 2008; Olivia Judson, "Resurrection Science," New York Times, 11/25; Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim, "Five Best Rare Books On Early America," Wall Street Journal, 11/21. (2) Gail Selinger with W. Thomas Smith, Jr. The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pirates: Fascinating Facts About The World's Most Infamous Pirates, Alpha, New York (2006).

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