Creative Accounting: Alternative Facts in the History of the Pirate, John Gow

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Abstract: The narratives in Captain Charles Johnson’s General History of the Pyrates (1724–1728) have often been regarded as reliable accounts of pirate activity between 1690 and 1726, in part because the book’s long-held attribution to Daniel Defoe has, until recently, granted it some measure of journalistic integrity. A closer examination of one of General History’s narratives, that of the Scottish pirate, John Gow, reveals a story filled with contradictions, loose ends, possible fabrications, and simple errors, to the point where a definitive account of Gow’s activities becomes almost impossible to determine. This paper compares the two Gow narratives found in the 1725 and 1728 editions of General History with naval reports, newspaper accounts, and pamphlet narratives, all of which offer vastly differing versions of Gow’s story. As the general outlines of the story become fixed in various tellings, we can see how the focus of these narratives shifts from being a simple record of criminal activity to a drama in which the pirate must satisfy the expectation of being hostis humani generis—the enemy of all humanity—to the point where violence, rape, murder, and other anti-social acts overshadow the maritime plundering of goods and money as the pirate’s chief defining characteristic.

Keywords: pirate narratives; General History of the Pyrates; John Gow; Scotland; newspapers; pamphlets; Daniel Defoe

1. Introduction

In “Well-Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History”, Mark G. Hanna challenges the view, outlined by Marcus Rediker, Peter Linebaugh, and others, that eighteenth-century pirates were egalitarian, proto-Marxist radicals, who “challenged nearly every form of eighteenth-century social inequality that modern readers find repulsive” (Hanna 2015, p. 130). Hanna argues convincingly that the pirates who dominate both historical and literary narratives—and, by extension, who have largely created our image of piracy itself—were “atypical”, in that they actively courted notoriety and embraced an anti-heroic image; their colourful, larger-than-life personae thus overshadowed the majority of sailors who had committed acts of piracy, but who also, as Hanna reminds us, “return[ed] quietly to the North American colonies1, where they bought land, married local women, and remained generally ‘well-behaved’” (Hanna 2015, p. 133). As Hanna’s title suggests, such figures hardly make for interesting reading, since it was the outrageous figures who, in the eighteenth century as now, captured the attention of the reading public. It is not surprising, therefore, to find embellishment, exaggeration, and even outright fabrication in published pirate narratives. At the same time, these narratives have served to provide historical verisimilitude to popular cultural representations of pirates, so that the pirate of history becomes indistinguishable from the pirate of fiction.

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1 One might more accurately add “and elsewhere”, since ex-pirates could be found back in the British Isles. The colonies, however, did offer excellent chances someone on the run from the law in England to start life over with a fair degree of anonymity.
Part of the problem, of course, is the relative scarcity of historical documents relating to pirates of the last part of the so-called Golden Age—roughly the years between 1716 and 1726—but some of the difficulty in critiquing pirate narratives lies in the historical authority and stamp of authenticity that have been bestowed upon the ones that do exist. Chief among these is Captain Charles Johnson’s *General History of the Pyrates* (1724–1728), long considered a definitive source for narratives of pirates active during the height of the Golden Age. Confidently ascribed to Daniel Defoe by John Robert Moore in 1939 (*Moore 1973*)—an ascription endorsed and perpetuated by Defoe scholars, biographers, and by the sole scholarly edition that has appeared to date, Manuel Schonhorn’s 1972 volume—*General History* has been repeatedly cited by historians who, assured of Defoe’s meticulous scholarship, his unusually modern journalistic integrity, and his extensive first-hand knowledge of pirate activity, have assumed the unimpeachable reliability of *General History*’s narratives. Even though Defoe’s authorship has been challenged since 1988, a robust tradition has developed in both popular and scholarly works of treating *General History*’s narratives as reliable.

A closer look at one of these narratives suggests that Johnson’s reliability may not be so readily assumed: while some of *General History* displays evidence of a skilful fusion of primary and secondary sources into seamless narrative, other parts of the book—in particular the narratives added to the Second, Third, and Fourth editions—show evidence of hasty writing and clumsy editing. Schonhorn’s edition glosses over the many changes in the book from edition to edition; changes whose authority any textual editor would rightly question in the absence of any adequate documentation: we simply have no way of knowing who was responsible for these revisions. The inherent unreliability of some of *General History*’s narrative can tell us much about how pirate narratives become shaped to satisfy the expectations of a particular audience, the largely London-based, middle-class readers who would have been willing to spend the four to five shillings in the case of the second edition—to read these stories; the authority granted to the narratives in Johnson’s *General History*—especially when the book is assumed to be Defoe’s *General History*—can also be a useful exercise in considering the relationship between author, publisher, and reader. Assessing the veracity of pirate narratives necessarily involves examining the reality of their publication history.

Schonhorn begins his edition by asserting that Defoe “has . . . been a treasure trove for historians”, so that “it is quite natural that we turn to this most representative of Englishmen . . . for what has become the principal source of the lives of the pirates and pirate history during the first twenty-five years of the eighteenth century” (*Johnson 1999*, p. xi). Schonhorn, in fact, goes out of his way to praise Defoe’s journalistic integrity, calling the book “[o]rdered, arranged, detailed and well-researched” (*Johnson 1999*, p. xxxiv), and noting that Defoe, “confronted with an abundance of factual material . . . perhaps felt no need to expand the volume with dramatic or imaginative sequences” (*Johnson 1999*, p. xxxiv)—a claim that, as we shall see, does not entirely stand up under

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2 *General History* appeared in four editions between 1724 and 1728: The First Edition (*Johnson 1724a*), published in May 1724, was substantially revised and republished in August of the same year (*Johnson 1724b*). Unsold sheets from the Second Edition were reissued in 1725 with the chapter on John Gow added (*Johnson 1725*). Finally, this so-called Third Edition was again reissued, with the Gow chapter substantially revised (*Johnson 1728a*), and a second volume added alongside it (*Johnson 1728b*).

3 See, for example, Marcus Rediker’s treatment of Mary Read and Anne Bonny in *Villains of All Nations* (*Rediker 2004*), in which he summarises the stories from *General History*, although he is careful to include the testimony of witnesses recorded in *The Tryals of John Rackam*. Rediker acknowledges the literary parallels of the Read and Bonny stories, but also contends that “[t]he narratives are in almost all respects plausible” (*Rediker 2004*, p. 203). By contrast, Peter Lehr’s (2019) book, *Pirates: A New History* confidently retells the highly embellished stories of Read and Bonny as unquestioned fact, suggesting, at the very least, that Lehr assumed no controversy in using *General History* as a reliable historical source book.

4 Hal Gladfelder has addressed the difficult question of who exactly the readers of crime narratives were. He specifically cites *General History*’s price as evidence of a possible middle-class reader; he cites a puff piece from *Mist’s Weekly Journal* (1725) that compares the cost of *General History* to the cost of attending a masquerade (*Gladfelder 2001*, p. 207). However, Gladfelder is careful to point out that there is simply not enough evidence to make any definitive statements about the intended audience for these works, although literate Londoners with a certain disposable income may be safely included. *General History* also makes use of classical allusions and quotations, suggesting a readership at least comfortable with the better-known Roman historians.
scrutiny. Nevertheless, Schonhorn also asserts that Defoe, far from simply providing “compilations of available data capably albeit mechanically arranged”, used his “narrative skill” to make these stories “eminentlly readable and even exciting” by means of “pertinent additions” (Johnson 1999, p. xxxv).

Defoe, in Schonhorn’s evaluation, employs the factual rigour of the journalist with the narrative skill of the novelist—a unique blend of talents that also handily dismisses the still-unresolved question of whether Defoe actually had anything to do with General History at all. Who else but Defoe in 1724 could have struck exactly the right blend of accuracy and readability?

If we remove Defoe’s authoritative presence, and allow ourselves to see General History as something other than a masterful blend of disinterested journalism embellished with the novelist’s touch, we can see how the book’s narratives actually use the veneer of journalistic objectivity to inscribe both its pirate subjects and piracy itself within a specific ideological framework. As Hal Gladfelder has demonstrated, crime writing was a relatively new genre in the 1720s, and its development alongside both newspapers and novels placed it in an interesting position in the literary marketplace. Between the quick flash of the newspaper and the slower burn of the novel lay popular crime narratives that, while still capitalising on the ephemeral fame of the condemned criminal, also demanded more careful perusal than a five- to ten-line newspaper account. Trial reports and last-confession pamphlets, along with shilling pamphlets of various lengths, all offered various accounts of a criminal’s actions, sometimes devised and printed especially for the day a particular felon was due to be hanged; a macabre souvenir of an equally macabre event. The pamphlets, however, sometimes attempted to offer the kind of psychological investigation that was also being explored in the novel: these longer biographies found motives for crime from incidents in the felon’s childhood, or related events that showed a predisposition—even “destiny”—to a life of crime. These longer narratives attempted to derive some meaning from the actions of criminals, whether to establish what Lincoln Faller calls “an etiology of crime”, or to suggest a larger political and social significance to the activities of men and women who, except for their crimes, would be of little interest to eighteenth-century readers. In the case of pirates, I would argue that the longer narratives also attempted to construct a definable culture of piracy, whose chief features had less to do with the simple plundering of goods, and more to do with an interest in overturning the social order, through theft, violence, and even murder. To return to Hanna’s phrase, in pirate narratives, the “well-behaved pirate” not only fails to make history, but fails to be recognised as a pirate at all.

We can see exactly how this process of narrative transformation works in the short career of John Gow, a Scottish pirate who made a brief sensation in 1725, and whose story appeared in numerous iterations between March and August, 1725. The Gow story is useful for a number of reasons. The available versions of Gow’s story exist in all the major genres of crime writing that existed in 1724: newspaper accounts, trial documents, a last confession, a substantial pamphlet narrative, and, of course, a chapter in Johnson’s General History. We are, therefore, able to trace fairly easily how Gow’s story altered and developed as it entered the public sphere. Second, both the Gow chapter in General History and the separate pamphlet Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow (Anonymous 1725a), sold by rival publisher John Applebee, provided Moore with evidence for Defoe’s authorship of both works. Again, in light of General History’s publication history, Moore’s choice of the highly unreliable Gow narrative as his main proof of authorship seems especially curious, but helps us trace how the process of granting authority based on perceived expertise can mask even the most contentious work. The publication history of these different versions of Gow’s narrative reveals a tale rife with contradictions, as various authors and publishers competed with each other to take advantage of this one pirate’s 15 min of fame. By tracing the progress of the story from newspaper reports to various published pamphlets, we can more clearly see how General History’s reputation as a collection of, in Manuel

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5 See (Gladfelder 2001).
6 See (Faller 1987), especially chp. 3 (pp. 52–71).
Schonhorn’s words, “the most authoritative pirate biographies of [the] day” (Johnson 1999, p. xxiii) must bear some serious reconsideration.

That so many versions of Gow’s story should appear so quickly is especially curious, given that Gow himself was not an especially noteworthy pirate, and, indeed, hardly appears as the hero of his own tale. Unlike Henry Avery, he captured no legendary prize ships; unlike Blackbeard or Edward Low, his fame does not rest on his larger-than-life personality or his reputation for excessive violence; and unlike Bartholomew Roberts, he never captured a huge amount of ships or distinguished himself even in the infamous annals of piracy. Gow’s chief claim to fame, in fact, seems to be his ill-conceived plan to return to his birthplace in the Orkney Islands, where he was quickly cornered and captured. Had he not been captured in British waters, and had reports of his capture not been published, it is unlikely that Gow would have made much of a sensation. Nevertheless, between March and August, 1725, several widely differing accounts of Gow’s activities appeared in print. What is astonishing to read now—and what will be the focus of my paper—is how widely differently the same basic narrative is presented in the space of a few months, so that a “definitive” account of Gow’s activities and his motives is especially difficult to discern.

The basic facts of Gow’s story seem to be as follows. Gow, a 27-year-old native of the Orkneys (although the 1728 edition of General History gives his age as 35), signed on at Amsterdam in the fall of 1724 as second mate and boatswain aboard the Carolina Galley, captained by French resident of Guernsey, Oliver Furneau. All accounts agree that Furneau was a poor captain, especially notorious for withholding sailor’s pay and denying them even decent food rations. By November, Furneau was dead, and Gow was the new captain of a pirate ship, renamed the Revenge. Accounts differ over who actually started the mutiny: the anonymous Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow suggests that two Swedish crewmembers, Winter and Peterson, and a third, Daniel McAuley, began complaining to Furneau while the ship was docked in Texel, and that Gow was one of several crewmembers recruited to the mutiny some weeks later. (Anonymous 1725a, pp. 2–5) The 1725 version of General History, however, suggests that Gow and his friend (and later adversary) James Williams had “diverse Consults in what Manner to seize the Ship and go a Pyrating in her, which, ’tis thought, they design’d when they first came aboard at Rotterdam (Johnson 1725, p. 419). Whatever the truth, on 3 November, the crew seized the ship and murdered Furneau, and Gow was acclaimed as captain. From November to March the Revenge cruised the North Atlantic, seizing ships whose cargo mostly consisted of such items as hogsheads of Newfoundland fish. By January 1725, the Revenge had sailed to the Orkneys, ostensibly to careen the ship and perhaps to sell some of the plundered cargo. Gow and his crew now posed as legitimate merchants, with Gow taking on the alias of Smith, while the ship was renamed the rather uninspired George. At this point, however, some of Gow’s men deserted, and reported Gow as a pirate to authorities. Gow, however, quickly left the port of Cairston—modern-day Stromness—and sailed to the Island of Eday, where they were eventually captured by an old schoolmate of Gow’s, James Fea, at the beginning of February. After being held briefly in Edinburgh, the pirates were transferred to London, where they were tried at the end of May, and executed on 11 July.

7 “Rotterdam” seems to be a mistake for Amsterdam. The 1728 revision of the Gow chapter conflates the two stories, by way of a curious revision in the pirated History and Lives: in that version of the story, Gow conspires with one T. Swan to take over the ship, but none other than James Belvin informs on them: Swan is dismissed, but Gow, for some reason, is promoted to second mate, while Belvin is made boatswain. Some time later, then, the conflicts with Peterson, Winter, and McAuley arise.

8 Exactly how Gow was chosen Captain is unclear. The 1725 version of General History declares that Williams, “with no other Ceremony than striking his Cutlass on one of the great Guns” (p. 422) salutes Gow as captain, implying that the decision was his alone—a detail that underscores the irony of Williams’ later unsuccessful attempt at seizing command. Conduct and Proceedings suggests the decision was made by a unanimous vote of the crew. The 1728 revision of General History provides only the vague report that Gow was “declared Captain.” (Johnson 1999, p. 360). Whatever the process, Gow was chosen because of his experience in navigation, not because of his desire for plunder.
2. Early Reports and Newspaper Articles

The narratives mentioned above—the pamphlet *Conduct and Proceedings*, the heavily-plagiarised *History and Lives*, and, above all, Johnson’s *General History*—all come at the end of a line of transmission that serves both to solidify the narrative details and to allow for those details to be shaped into a coherent, meaningful whole. Reports and newspaper accounts in the early eighteenth century, as Gladfelder asserts, had the advantage of immediacy, so that “actions unfolded within the same temporal horizon as the reader’s experience of their printed representations” (Gladfelder 2001, p. 45). At the same time, “the increasing accessibility of print meant that narratives were increasingly vulnerable to revision, that cases could be more publicly disputed and reopened, that the story was still, inextinguishably, unfolding” (Gladfelder 2001, p. 46). Such “revision” is not simply a matter of updating facts, or of adding details to what is already known; it is a process whereby a narrative settles into meaning: details become relevant insofar as they serve to support a consensus of interpretation. In the case of the Gow story, we can trace how the narrative becomes shaped to make Gow less “well-behaved”, to extend his anti-social behaviour to a point beyond mere plunder, to turn the pirate into the monster.

The earliest mention of Gow comes from a declaration made by Andrew Watt, master of the ship *Margaret* of Burntisland, dated 9 February 1725. Watt identifies the ship in Cairston now named the *George* as the same ship he had seen in Amsterdam in June, 1724, named the *Carolina*; he further identifies Gow as the same man who was aboard the *Carolina*. Watt declares that two of his apprentices, Henry Jamieson and Donald McAulay, had deserted him in Amsterdam and had joined Gow’s ship; in Cairston, Watt boards the ship to inquire if the apprentices might be returned to him, but he is initially rebuffed by Gow. However, Jamieson makes himself known to Watt, and both begs forgiveness and identifies Gow and his crew as pirates:

> Jamieson told him [i.e., Watt] with tears in his eyes he was weary of that service and that he was sorry he could have left him at Amsterdam and the declarant having enquired the particulars of his voyage aboard the *Carolina* Galley Jamieson told him that he and McAuley sailed with that Galley to Saint a Crux on the Coast of Barbary and having delivered out their cargo they loaded copper and bees wax[.] That upon the second or third day after they sailed from St a Crux, Gow and the rest of the crew conspired to run away with the ship and for that end agreed to murder the Captain, the Chief Mate the doctor, and the Clerk and accordingly they did murder the mate a bed, and the doctor and clerk, & the Captain being above deck one of the sailors a Dutch man came up to him and stabbed him with his knife and then the rest of the crew came about him and threw him over board and when this was done the crew declared that said John Gow Captain and changed the name of the ship from the *Carolina* Galley to the *Revenge*, that on their way to the Orkneys they boarded four ships and plundered out of them what they had a mind to[,] that the fruits and wines which were on board were taken out of one of these ships, that the name of the Commander of one of these ships was Somervell and that his ship was loaded with salmond, & herring from Glasgow which they took out of him and likeways carried off his Carpenter and Boy who are yett aboard, That when the ship came near to the Orkneys Gow the Commander who went under the name John Smith changed the ships name from the *Revenge* and called her the *George*[.] (Watt 1725, p. 2)

Jamieson’s story conforms to many of the basic facts as we know them, and is the first written confirmation of Gow as a pirate. Watt goes on to state that some of Gow’s crew were already for deserting and surrendering to the authorities, and that the ship itself appeared armed with two swivel

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9 It is unclear whether Donald McAulay is the same individual who is named Daniel McAulay in the later narratives: confusion over names seems to be a distinctive feature of the entire Gow story.
guns for defence as she sailed out of Cairston on 1 February. Watt provides a detailed description of the ship, presumably for the authorities to identify it easily.

In addition to Watt’s report, there exists a short letter, dated 28 February 1725, from three Edinburgh customs officers to an unnamed “Lord” (one of the Commissioners of Customs, as the letter’s cover suggests) that Gow and his crew had been apprehended “in the Island of Ada” (by which is presumably meant “Eday”), and that the customs officers have sent “strict orders” to have the ship’s cargo seized and an exact account made of its contents (Commissioners of Customs 1725).

Each of these two short accounts is actually concerned less with Gow’s deeds than with matters of the ship itself. Watt is eager for the return of his deserting apprentices, and it is Jamieson’s confession that supplies the evidence of piracy. The second document is entirely concerned with stolen goods, and an assurance that none of these good would be disbursed but remain safely in the hands of the Customs office. Very little of Gow’s character can be gleaned from either document, and certainly there are few details of the seizure of the Carolina, a point of some confusion in the later narratives.

By 13 March, the first newspaper reports of Gow’s capture began to circulate. An item in the Daily Post notes how Gow and his crew, now revealed to be pirates, had sailed to Calfsound, on the neighbouring island of Eday, where, “by the good Conduct and Management of James Fea of Chestrane [sic]”, they were captured (Daily Post 1725). The London Journal (1725), published the same day, offers substantially the same information, save for the unfortunate misidentification of Fea as “James Tea of Clestram”; an item in the Newcastle Courant (1725), also published 13 March, again repeats the same information, but spells Fea’s name correctly. James Read’s Weekly Journal; or, The British Gazetleer for 3 April was the first paper to report a fuller version of the capture, including the details that Gow sailed to Calfsound specifically to rob the house of “a Gentleman” (the identification of this gentleman as James Fea was not made till later), and that at some point three women were abducted and used for sexual pleasure by the crew. At Calfsound, Gow sent his boatswain and four men ashore to borrow a boat big enough to carry an anchor, where they were detained at an alehouse. Gow then came ashore himself, and was also arrested. Finally, the remainder of his crew “all came on Shoar by twos and threes very drunk, and surrender’d themselves.” From there, the pirates were transferred to Edinburgh, then to trial and execution in London. The Weekly Journal account is noteworthy in that it does not mention anything of Gow’s cargo, or, indeed, seem much interested at all in the actual piracy—the report is mainly on the actions of a group of anarchic, drunken sailors who have committed crimes on shore—the robbing of a gentleman’s house and the abduction and rape of three women (Weekly Journal 1725). Clearly, then, “pirate” signifies something besides the plundering of goods at sea; to be a pirate also means to commit atrocities on land.

3. Warner, Applebee, and the Rush to Print

The complications of the Gow story begin after the trial, which took place in London on 29 May 1725. Both Thomas Warner, publisher of the second edition of Johnson’s General History, and noted “true crime” publisher John Applebee, began to compete for the honour of being the first to publish a definitive account of Gow’s life and crimes. Two days after the trial, the Daily Post advertised a pamphlet from Applebee, Adventures and Proceedings of the Famous Capt. John Gow, listed as being “in the Press, and will be publish’d in a very few Days.” We hear nothing more of this title in the days following, but on 10 June a third edition of General History was advertised, now with a new chapter on Gow. This “third edition”, however, was actually composed of unsold sheets of the second edition,

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10 James Fea VI of Clestrain (c. 1693–1756) was a member of a prominent Orkney landowning family, the Feas of Clestrain. He had acquired the house on Eday as part of his marriage to Janet Buchanan in 1720. Interestingly, the Hall of Clestrain, a small manor house approximately seven miles southwest of Cairston, was occupied by Robert Honeyman and was attacked by some members of Gow’s crew.

11 This paper should not be confused with Nathaniel Mist’s Weekly Journal, or Saturday’s Post, begun in 1715 and renamed Mist’s Weekly Journal in 1725 (Mist’s Weekly Journal 1725).
to which the Gow chapter had been hurriedly—and somewhat clumsily—added. While it is unclear where the author of the Gow chapter in General History got the information for the earlier part of Gow’s story, the account of his capture seems to be derived only from the Weekly Journal article of 3 April, which omits naming James Fea as the chief architect of their undoing. However, the detail of the abduction of the three young women—surely one aspect of Gow’s notoriety too good to pass up—is absent from this account as well. Most curious, though, is General History’s insistence on calling Gow “Smith”, which all others agree was an alias he used only upon his return to Scotland, trying to pass himself off as a reputable trader.

By far the longest account of Gow’s story, Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow, published on 2 July, was the long-delayed Adventures and Proceedings pamphlet that had been advertised at the end of May. At 62 pages—compared with the mere 10 and a half pages that comprise the General History chapter—Conduct and Proceedings offers considerably more detail on Gow’s activities and his capture—but, as with General History, it is unclear where the author has derived his information. Manuel Schonhorn, following John Robert Moore’s suggestion, asserts that Defoe wrote both the General History chapter and Conduct and Proceedings. He concludes that Defoe, contributing regularly to Applebee’s Weekly Original Journal at this time, also dashed off the General History version of the story to allow publication before Gow’s execution, and before the Applebee pamphlet could appear. Defoe then wrote Conduct and Proceedings at a relatively more leisurely pace, perhaps allowing him to check his facts more carefully. There is a tradition that has Defoe as a regular visitor to condemned cells in Newgate and the Marshalsea, the better for him to conduct first-hand interviews with condemned criminals; this tradition, of course, lends Conduct and Proceedings an air of authenticity. Yet, Defoe was seemingly not finished with the Gow story: for the fourth edition of General History in 1728, Schonhorn suggests that Defoe returned to his original Gow chapter and, using Conduct and Proceedings mostly (but not exclusively!), “presented the most succinct account of the affair” (p. 681). However, if Conduct and Proceedings was advertised as being in press almost two weeks before General History was published, then we must accept not only that Defoe was simultaneously writing competing and contradicting accounts for two different publishers—in effect, competing with himself—but also that he was deliberately suppressing or falsifying information in the shorter account, saving the “true” facts for the Applebee pamphlet. This scenario strains credulity; it seems much easier to accept that Warner hired an anonymous hack to churn out the General History chapter while Defoe—if it even was Defoe—was already preparing his account for Applebee. Conduct and Proceedings does seem remarkably detailed in its account, quoting the full text of letters exchanged between Gow and Fea (dated between 13 and 16 February), along with a copy of a draft of articles Gow drew up to prevent his crew deserting once the ship had run aground at Calfsound.

Apart from a standard “Last Confession” pamphlet published on 27 July—by Warner, interestingly, perhaps looking to regain some part of the market interest in Gow’s story after being scooped by Applebee—we hear nothing of Gow’s story until 7 August, in the mysterious History and Lives of all the Most Notorious Pirates and their Crews, a plagiarised, condensed version of Johnson’s General History, published by Edward Midwinter, a specialist in cheap reprints. An official trial transcript seems not to have been published, although the Last Confession pamphlet does contain portions of the trial summarized. While much of History and Lives is lifted verbatim from General History, the Gow chapter has been freshly written, although it introduces new contradictions and complications.

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12 My reason for calling the addition “clumsy” stems from the fact that the gathering prior to the one that contains the Gow narrative is signed “Cc,” while the Gow gathering, which also contains the narrative of Captain Spriggs, is signed “cc”. The Gow chapter begins on “cc9,” and continues to “cc11.” The next gathering, then, begins with “Dd,” using the sheets from the second edition, but gathering “cc” ends on page 430, while “Dd” begins on page 417. In the copy I have examined, page numbers 417–422 are crossed out, and 431–437 written above them in an eighteenth-century hand.

13 Peterkin specifically mentions the publication of Sir Walter Scott’s heavily fictionalised version of the Gow story, The Pirate (1822), as the occasion for a miscellany collection of documents and stories related to these islands. See (Peterkin 1822, pp. 212–24).
For example, both *Conduct and Proceedings* and the *Last Confession* pamphlet specifically mention that Gow’s boatswain, James Belvin, was not a member of the crew that mutinied against Captain Furneau, but came aboard willingly from one of the ships Gow raided. “Last Confession” even specifically mentions that Belvin was hanged primarily for his willingness to turn pirate (i.e., he was not coerced or threatened—an important legal point in determining the guilt of pirate crewmembers). *History and Lives*, however, not only makes Belvin part of the original crew, but relates that he had actually reported to Furneau that he had heard Gow planning the mutiny with a man named Swan: but rather than dismissing Gow, Furneau blamed Swan entirely and ordered him off the ship, while Gow was promoted to second mate and gunner.

Given such a glaringly obvious fabrication, it might be easy to write off *History and Lives* as a worthless piracy, but for the fact that the text seems to have influenced the revised version of the Gow narrative in the 1728 edition of *General History*. No doubt realising the problems with the original 1725 version, someone—perhaps the new publisher, Thomas Woodward—commissioned a thorough rewrite of the Gow chapter. The James Belvin story from *History and Lives* reappears here, despite having no authority from any of the other accounts. In fact, none of the three major accounts of the Carolina Galley mutiny from 1725—the original *General History* chapter, *Conduct and Proceedings*, and *History and Lives*—appears to match up in any detail, except perhaps the date of the mutiny and the name of the captain. The 1728 *General History* chapter—the one used as the copy-text in Schonhorn’s modern scholarly edition—simply reprints bits and pieces of *History and Lives* and *Conduct and Proceedings*—but it is this version which Schonhorn says Defoe reworked as “the most succinct” account of Gow and his career.

One more example may serve to make my point. The story of the abduction of the three women, although little more than a minor, albeit salacious detail in the Gow narrative, is nevertheless useful as a point of study to demonstrate the uncertainty of these various accounts. Fea’s first letter to Gow, dated 15 February 1725, refers to “the women” carried on board Gow’s ship, and to the plundering of Honeyman’s house (Peterkin 1822, p. 214), but nothing more is said of these women. The earliest report, from the 3 April *Weekly Journal*, ultimately derives from a 25 March update from the ship *Greyhound*, carrying the prisoners from Edinburgh to London. The story here is simply that three women were abducted, and returned to shore after being used as sexual playthings by the sailors. The third edition of *General History* omits the story entirely, but *Conduct and Proceedings* reports that the women were “used so Inhumanly, that when they set them on Shore again, they were not able to go or to stand: and we hear that one of them dyed on the Beach where they left them” (*Conduct and Proceedings*, p. 33). The author does not report further from whom this new information derives, but it certainly is the kind of detail that would serve well to underline the cruelty and, as the pamphlet suggests, inhumanity of Gow’s crew. *History and Lives* reports that only two women were abducted and “Ravish’d, and kept two or three Days, and then let … go” (Anonymous 1725c, p. 154). No one dies on the beach, but the two women are apparently new sisters, since they return home to find “the Old Woman their Mother dead, by the Blow of a Pistol which Belbin (note spelling!) the Boatswain gave her on the Head, for begging that they would not take away her Daughters” (Anonymous 1725c, p. 154). The reliability of this version is seriously undermined by the narrative stating that the incident with the women took place at Calfsound, and “from thence they went to the Island of Eda”—clearly not realising that Calfsound is a small bay in the northeast part of the island of Eday. Finally, the fourth edition of *General History*, published in 1728, restores the abduction story, but in a slightly different form from the *History and Lives* version: here, the boatswain goes ashore, and “[carries] off two young Women, the Mother of whom, crying and begging of them to let alone her Daughters, was knocked down by the Villain with a Pistol, of which ’tis said, she died the next Day, and the poor Girls were hurried on Board, and used in a most inhumane manner” (Johnson 1999, p. 365).

Three women, or two? One dead on the beach, or not? A mother killed by a pistol blow, or not? Perhaps the appearance of the adjective “inhumane” in 1728 is significant: it is possibly an echo of *Conduct and Proceedings*, though without the lurid detail of women unable to stand once released, and
of one dying on the beach. Yet, why omit this detail? And why is nothing heard of the fatally beaten mother until fairly late? It should also be noted that, if James Belvin the boatswain were in fact guilty of killing this old woman, the fact is not mentioned by the author of Conduct and Proceedings, even though he singles Belvin out for a special mention, as a “stout, brisk Fellow”, who came to Gow’s crew from the first ship they captured. James Guthrie, the ordinary who heard the pirates’ confessions and who published an obligatory account of the same on 27 July, notes that Belvin was condemned for assisting in the capture of his own ship, and afterwards for freely joining Gow’s crew. Yet Guthrie notes only Belvin’s hypocrisy in complaining of one of his fellow pirates’ habit of “Swearing and Lying”, when he himself was “more than Guilty of the same Faults” (Anonymous 1725b, p. 19). Belvin, it seems, transforms in the retellings from being a fairly average sailor who eagerly turns pirate at the right opportunity to being a bloodthirsty, cruel villain, capable of abducting and raping young women and pistol-whipping their mother to death.

Exactly how bloodthirsty were Gow and his crew? We probably shall never know for sure, but if we can doubt the details of the Gow narrative in a little, we can also doubt the details in much. What is at issue here is how these details contribute to the notoriety of these pirates, and how the focus shifts away from their economic to their moral significance. It is not enough for pirates simply to plunder ships or even houses, but “inhumane” violence, rape, and even murder must somehow be attached to these men. Even a relatively uninspiring and bland pirate like Gow is surrounded in the longer accounts with gruesome details; all the more striking, since Gow himself is a rather passive figure, in many ways barely the hero of his own story.

Ultimately, our reading of these pirate narratives is coloured by the authority of Defoe’s name being attached to them. If our only source for the Gow story were Schonhorn’s edition of the 1728 version of General History, we might assume a relatively coherent narrative, and might accept at face value Schonhorn’s account of its composition. However, when we consider the full publication history, including the postponed Applebee pamphlet of 29 May, the date of the publication of the radically different 1725 version of General History, and even the wildly inaccurate History and Lives version as a source for 1728, we have to pause and reconsider exactly how we can regard any account as authoritative, much less definitive. The truth of what actually happened with Gow and his crew is contained somewhere in the morass of conflicting stories, but in the absence of any truly definitive documentation, the story of John Gow will remain an account composed primarily of “alternative facts.”

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