# Pirates and Writers at the Beginning of the 18th Century: Utopian Projects and Ideal Micro-states in the Indian Ocean

**Jean-Michel Racault**

Pirates' tales belong to island lore, mainly in those Caribbean and Indian Ocean areas where European piracy was the most active during the 17th and 18th centuries. Over a hundred years after Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, these legends still hold powerful appeal both for treasure hunters and novelists. Unsuccessful research has been carried out in various Indian Ocean islands to recover the presumed riches of the French pirate Olivier Levasseur, nicknamed La Buse, on the basis of the cryptic document which he left to the crowd attending his execution when he was hanged at Bourbon Island (nowadays La Réunion) in 1730. In his novel *Le Chercheur d'or* (The Goldseeker), J.M.G. Le Clézio recounts in a fictional mode the true story of his grandfather, Léon Leclézio, who spent nearly thirty years of his lifetime searching for a hoard of gold and precious stones supposedly hidden by an unknown privateer at the Anse aux Anglais, in the small island of Rodrigues.

However, the mirage of gold is but a part of the pirates' legend, which also includes an exotic dream of political freedom, an escape to an "elsewhere", free from all the constraints of modern law-abiding societies, where man can set his own rules and become his own king. To many writers and readers of the beginning of the 18th century, the pirate figure embodied an aspiration for liberty which the European order could no longer satisfy[1]. This was the time when in England the bourgeois social order was destroying the mid-17th century revolutionary era's radical hopes for a social change. At the same time, in France, the control of the centralized monarchic state over individual life was strengthening, especially in religious matters — the Edict of Nantes had been revoked in 1685

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## From Piracy to Utopia

Piracy therefore may be seen not only as an individual and anarchic revolt against social, moral and religious rules, but also as a form of counter-society, a positive model for another kind of collective organization. As far as we can ascertain through the very few reliable accounts left by direct witnesses, such as the narrative of John Exquemelin (*The Bucaniers of America*, 1678 for the Dutch original, 1684 for the English translation), who served as a surgeon on privateering ships, the world of piracy combined an extremely harsh fighting discipline with a democratic and even egalitarian spirit: the captain as well as the officers on board were elected by the crew and could be dismissed; any important decision had to be approved by the majority; all were entitled to a part of the loot; in case of serious wounds or amputations, a fixed sum was served to the victim; before each campaign, a covenant was established stipulating each person's obligations — a primitive form of the Lockean social contract preserving the rights of individual liberty as well as the need for a collective order.



Flag of French Privateers

Understandably, piracy may appear, when compared to the customs of society at large, as a positive if rather crude form of alternative practical Utopia, like various contemporary colonial experiments which were conceived not as mere geographical transplantations of the European models, but as original attempts towards a new and rational social order stemming from the *tabula rasa* of the state of nature: such were, to quote two undertakings often celebrated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the Quaker State of Pennsylvania, founded by William Penn on a basis of religious tolerance and peaceful cooperation with the natives, or the communist More-inspired Jesuits' "Reductions" of Paraguay.

It is perhaps therefore no coincidence that the pirate emerges for the first time as a literary figure between 1670 and 1730. This is the last great period of piracy, first in the Atlantic, mainly in the Caribbean zone, and then in the Indian Ocean: the Red Sea, the Mascarene Islands and above all Madagascar. This age of religious doubts, social criticism and questioning of accepted political models, which Paul Hazard in a famous book labelled as the time of the "European crisis of conscience"[2], also chronologically coincides with an infatuation of the reading public for travel literature — often the vehicle of a relativistic contestation of Western mores and modes of government — and with the rise of new forms of narrative Utopias, the paradigm of which may be Denis Veiras' *History of the Sevarites*.[3] Veiras, a French Protestant exile who had settled in England where he worked as a diplomatic agent for the Admiralty, published the first part of his book in English in 1675, and then the complete version in French, in several volumes, between 1677 and 1679.

This work was widely read throughout Europe until the end of the 18th century and, thanks to the numerous imitations it inspired, gave birth to a true literary genre. These Utopias, often written by Huguenot exiles or libertine free-thinkers, all present the same characteristics. They are not mere political platforms in the English "Harringtonian" tradition of the 17th century,[4] nor romances, but realistic novels disguised as genuine travel accounts, carefully authenticated by a strategy of verisimilitude; they depict an imaginary society generally located in some remote island of the southern hemisphere, or, as with Veiras' Sevarites, in the conjectural *Terra Australis incognita*; anti-Christianity, either deistic or materialistic, is a common ideological feature, along with rationalism and naturalism — the institutions range from a very mild form of tempered monarchy, as in Tyssot de Patot's *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé* (1710), to the Sevarites' very complex system of mixed government combining democracy, oligarchy and monarchy, to an extreme form of egalitarian communism, as in Gabriel de Foigny's *La Terre Australe Connue* (1676) with the English title *A New Discovery of Terra Incognita Australis* (1693), where the State has become useless, since perfectly rational beings, desiring only that which is reasonable. Whatever the political system, the suppression of private property and of money is a general rule, although it is not clear whether this should be interpreted as the expression of a "revolutionary" aspiration towards a classless society, as a tribute to a long-standing utopian tradition which goes back to Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*, or only as a mechanical reversal of the norms of our own society, a device in the imaginary creation of a utopian *mundus*".[5]

Many of these remarks inspired by fictitious utopian societies could also apply to various marginal communities. These links between piracy, radical political aspirations and utopian constructions, either in their practical form of concrete colonial experiments or, in the literary sense of the word, as fictional accounts of imaginary realms, are exemplified by several projects or attempted realizations of ideal micro-states in the Indian Ocean islands (the Mascarenes and Madagascar) towards the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, some of which raise problems of authenticity and literary authorship.

## An Ideal State - Libertalia

The most puzzling case is the pirate republic of Libertalia, the only source for which is the very detailed account of the second volume (1728) of *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*,[6] published under the name of a nonexistent "Captain Charles Johnson". The first volume (May 1724) went through several re-editions, in-

cluding a much enlarged and carefully revised version (as early as August 1724) based on the latest available material on pirates' biographies, the seriousness and reliability of which has been acknowledged by modern historians. Contrarily, the second volume (which was never re-issued), dealing mainly with English Madagascar-based piracy, is generally of a rather debatable factual accuracy: it contains very little external evidence and very few dates; there is not a single one in chapters XX and XXIII, in which the story of Libertalia is narrated.

Typically, it begins with the biography of its leaders and the origin of their vocation as pirates — this is the standard pattern of most chapters. The younger son of a nobleman from Provence, Misson by birth feels condemned to social frustration and is pushed toward adventure at sea as the only means of satisfying his ambitious desires. In Rome, where he is shocked by "the Luxury of the Papal Court", he meets another frustrated careerist, a Dominican monk called Caraccioli who, in his own words, doubting his fitness to "carry thro' the Hypocrite with Art enough to rise to any considerable Post in the Church", awaits "the first Opportunity to throw off this masquerading Habit". This opportunity will be Misson's invitation to go to sea with him on board the *Victoire*, a French pirate engaged in the war against the English. After the captain's death and that of the main officers in a fight at sea, Misson is easily convinced by Caraccioli's eloquence not only to assume the command of the ship, but also to turn her into a pirate vessel with which he might "bid defiance to the powers of Europe, enjoy every thing he wished, reign Sovereign of the Southern Seas, and lawfully make War on all the World, since it would deprive him of that Liberty to which he had a right by the laws of nature".

Let us skip over the properly piratical career of this strange team of philosophical outlaws, first in the Atlantic, then in the south-west of the Indian Ocean, mainly in the area of Madagascar and the Comoros archipelago. Its most striking characteristics are an extreme mercifulness and humanity quite unusual in such a profession, and a constant care on the part of the chiefs to justify their doings in the light of reason, morality and natural law. In the Comoros, the pirates became involved in local quarrels: Misson is persuaded by the queen of Anjuan ("Johanna" in the text) to enter into a military alliance against the neighbouring island of Moheli ("Mohilla"), marries the queen's sister, and wins the war against the Mohillians; but, like Gulliver at Lilliput, he grows tired of these petty disputes: he wisely refuses to wipe out the adversary and thinks it better for his community to settle a few hundred miles away, on the northern coast of Madagascar, in the bay of Diego Suarez.

The chosen spot offers a safe harbour and abundant fresh water, and it is there that the settlement of Libertalia is founded. The population of Liberi — such is the name of the citizens of this new republic — soon increases, especially when another pirate crew, Tom Tew's, joins the initial group. In addition to the European pirates from various countries and their Comorian wives — polygamy has been adopted as a general rule — the colony includes three hundred men sent by the queen of Anjuan




Map of Africa and Madagascar by Herman Moll, from *Atlas Geographus, Volume IV (1714).*



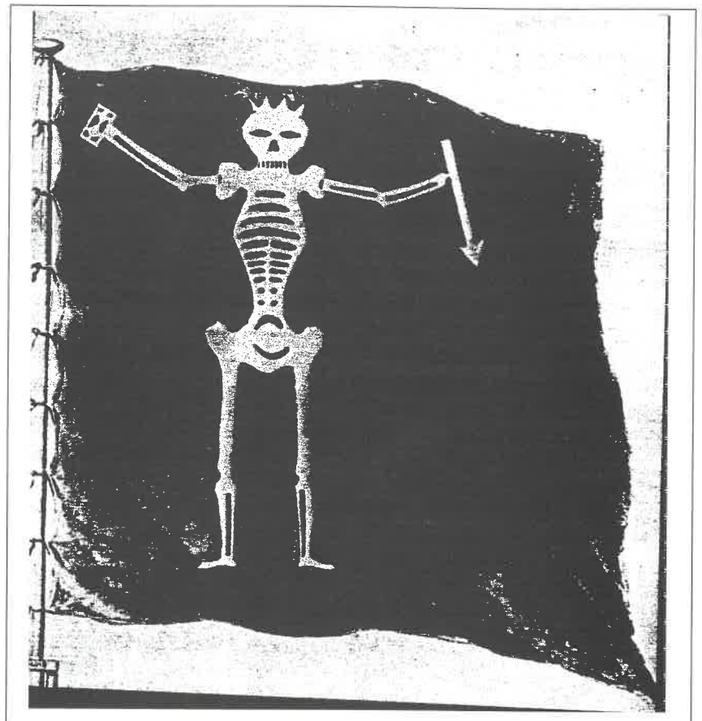


and several groups of African slaves liberated from Portuguese and English negro ships: for Misson's egalitarian and universalist view of human nature, slavery is not compatible with natural right or religion:

> "He told his men, that the trading for those of our own species, could never be agreeable to the eyes of Divine Justice: that no man had power to the liberty of another; and while those who professed a more enlightened knowledge of the Deity, sold men like beasts; they proved that their religion was no more than grimace, and that they differed from the barbarians in name only, since their practice was in nothing more humane: For his part, and he hoped, he spoke the sentiments of all his brave companions, he had not exempted his Neck from the galling yoak of slavery, and asserted his own liberty, to enslave others. That however, these men were distinguished from the Europeans by their colour, custom or religious rites, they were the work of the same omnipotent Being, and endowed with equal reason: wherefore, he desired they might be treated like freemen".

In doing so, Misson not only breaks with common European practices of the time, and anticipates the abolitionist movement of the French Revolution three quarters of a century later; he also proves himself more radical than is the case with the major trends of utopian tradition, in which slavery often strangely coexists with a theoretical affirmation of values such as Nature, Reason and Justice, which should logically exclude it.

It is a difficult task to obtain social unity within a community composed of ill-assorted individuals, all very different by their origins, languages and cultures: an artificial synthetic language was created, borrowing from the various idioms. More generally, the transition from the purely predatory and wandering existence of the pirate crews towards a wider-scale sedentary community implied a shift from the denial of social rules to the positive search for an ideal political model. The ideological background of the State of Libertalia was almost exactly the same as what can be found in contemporary utopian literature. Caraccioli, the colony's official philosopher, is obviously a disciple of the most radical currents of libertinism and free-thinking, reminiscent of Fontenelle and Bayle in France or of the English deists such as Collins, Toland, Tindal — although there was also a specifically Italian tradition of heterodox thought through the Paduan school and Giordano Bruno. Caraccioli's rationalistic deism openly unveils the critical themes more or less obliquely alluded to in Foigny's or Veiras' utopian novels: sarcastic criticism of the Bible and of miracles, doubts about the nature of the soul and its mortality or immortality, hostility towards all revealed religions, especially Christianity, considered in a "Machiavellian" perspective as a purely human means unfortunately necessary "for the preservation as the governing of the people", belief in a rather undefined *ens entium* deduced by sole Reason from the natural order of things and indifferent to our cults and prayers, quest for a political form of government preserving both the natural rights of the individual and the collective unity of the commonwealth.[7]



A privateers flag (from *Le Memorial de la Réunion)*

A constituent Assembly, whose task was the choice of the future institutions, was elected along these principles, "upon a

Democratical Form, where the People [are] themselves the Makers and Judges of their own Laws". However, the fundamental laws decreed by this assembly led to a strong and even autocratic form of government: Caraccioli, "with a handsome speech, showing the advantages flowing from order", obtained that the supreme power be entrusted to the rather monarchic figure of a Lord Conservator – Misson – who in his turn appointed the main officers of the State: Tew received the title of Admiral and Caraccioli himself was made Secretary of State. Yet the Conservator's power remained democratic in its essence, since, by being elected, he had received it from a Lockean Social Contract; moreover, as this charge was limited to a three-year commission, it could not become permanent, still less hereditary. Accordingly, the socio-economic communism excluding private property and monetary exchanges which had been the norm among the crew on board Misson's pirate ship seemed to give way to more conventional rules: after the settlement at Libertalia, private property was restored, since "an equal division" was made between the colonists of treasure and of cattle, and it was decided that "such Land as any particular Man would enclose, should, for the future, be deemed his Property". Paradoxically, the advent of a fully-fledged utopian state tends to abate the radical alternative which was the stamp of the pirates' life.

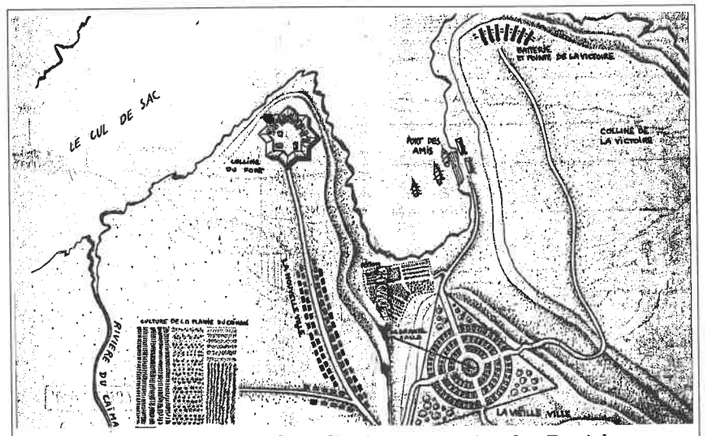
What would have become of Libertalia, had it survived? Perhaps it would have turned into a community of colonial rogues, robbers and highwaymen, like the so-called "Paulist republic" of South America which aroused so much interest among 18th century philosophers; perhaps, on the contrary, it could have become a respected nation, like some of those of the ancient world which had after all similar origins. But the colony was destroyed, in rather unexplained circumstances, in a sudden raid by the hitherto peaceful natives. Caraccioli was slaughtered with most of the citizens. Misson escaped, but lost his life some time later in a shipwreck, while Tew was killed in battle in the Red Sea. Like many similar contemporary attempts, Libertalia had failed, and even if in this case the failure was purely the contingent result of an external cause, it also suggests the fragility of all utopian structures.

Such are the main elements of the Libertalia story as it is told in the *General History of the Pirates* . Besides the specific interest of its radical political themes, and a paradoxical blend of peace and violence, it also includes all the expected ingredients of exotic romance, which have been left aside in this summary. Among the many questions which it raises, two may at present receive a satisfactory answer: to what extent is it true? and: who wrote the so-called Captain Johnson's account?

## A Piece of Fiction?

Until fairly recently, no one had questioned the veracity of the Libertalia episode, not even the specialists in Madagascar history. A leading anthropologist and historian, Hubert Deschamps, who wrote many academic books about the island, is also the author of a work on *Les Pirates à Madagascar aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* ,[8] largely based on the *History of the Pirates*. Two chapters are devoted to Libertalia (pp. 77-105).

Although Deschamps grants that "this unique tale of a man who became a pirate by sheer philanthropy cannot but rouse scepticism", he gives his arguments for the authenticity of the tale, firstly the general verisimilitude of the narrative and secondly the accuracy of the certain details – the situation of the colony in the bay of Diego Suarez , the scarce population of the Northern part of Madagascar, the rivalities between the Comoros islands of Anjuan and Moheli are realistically described. This also applied to the historical background: the foundation of Libertalia may have taken place in 1693, during the war of the League of Augsburg, at a time when Madagascar became the meeting-point of English and French pirates after they had been driven away from the Caribbean area. Deschamps makes only a single and very minor error in the description of a Madagascar native with a bow and arrows, these weapons were not in use on the island at the time.




The settlement of Libertalia (reconstruction by Daniel Vaxelaire, appendix to his novel *Les mutins de la liberté*.







Henry Avery, one of the first privateers operating in the Indian Ocean.

Deschamps was for many years an authority in the field of Madagascar studies, and his opinion on the authenticity of the Misson-Caraccioli case was generally endorsed by his followers, sometimes a bit reluctantly; Pierre Vérin just mentions it briefly, noting that "we do not have any archeological evidence for this Libertalia settlement, so that one can wonder whether it had ever existed at all except as a project".[9] But neither Auguste Toussaint, a well-known specialist in Indian Ocean history,[10] nor Gilles Lapouge, who, in his brilliant essay on *Les Pirates,*[11] uses Misson's story as a key point of his argumentation, ever had the slightest doubt about the existence of Libertalia. It is very frequently mentioned throughout the book of Lapouge, who saw in it the perfect illustration of his favourite thesis about piracy as a denial of history ("Misson probably dreamt of using piracy in order to wipe out the whole history of the world and to inaugurate a new one"). Libertalia proved powerfully attractive to novelists: Henry Vignes in *Les pirates de la liberté* (1964), Robert de la Croix and Thomas Narcejac in *Les pirates de Dieu* (1979), Daniel Vaxelaire in *Les mutins de la liberté* (1986) — where Caraccioli's utopian dream is modelled on Campanella's *City of the Sun* — all believed that they were writing a merely embellished version of a story that was basically true.

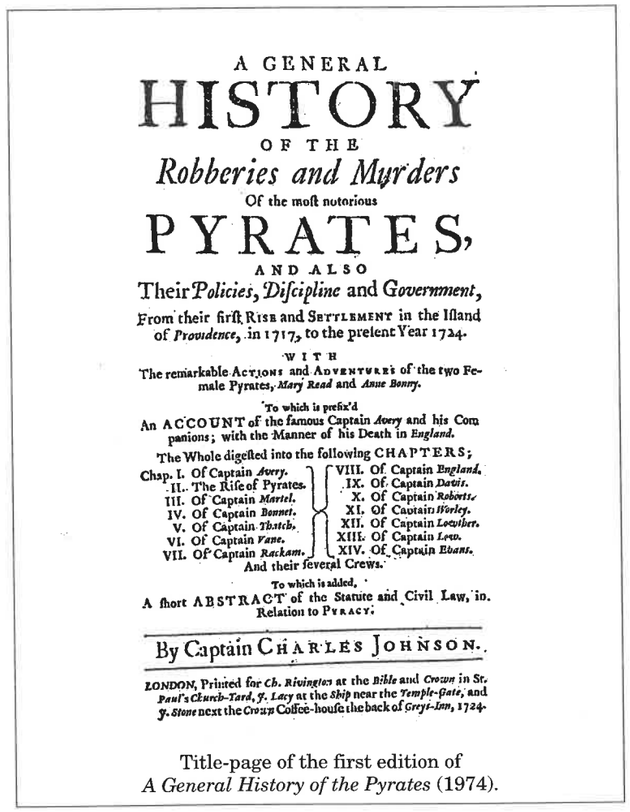
This story, however, rests entirely upon Johnson's narrative, since no other contemporary account or archives document can confirm the episode of Libertalia, or even the existence of Misson and Caraccioli. Johnson's reliability, and firstly his identity, were henceforth the focal point of the whole matter. It had been suggested very early on that "Captain Charles Johnson" was a pseudonym, for there was no naval officer of this name at the time. In the early thirties, an American bibliographer, John Robert Moore, grew convinced that the real author of the *General History of the Pirates* was Daniel Defoe. This proposed authorship, based on evidence in style, idiomatic phrases, narrative methods, techniques of circumstantial realism, as well as similarity of subject matter with Defoe's customary fields of interest (colonial matters, overseas trade, pirate stories), fitted in with the enormous bulk of what is acknowledged as Defoe's writings (over 500 titles, many of them, admittedly, merely pamphlets). Besides, the authorship attributed to Defoe, as expounded in 1939 by J. R. Moore in his book *Defoe in the Pillory and other Studies,*[12] had been until recently[13] universally accepted among Defoe scholars.

If the *General History of the Pirates* is not, as was supposed for a long time, the reliable work of a scrupulous historian who might himself have been a former pirate, as is sometimes suggested, but the spurious production of a journalist-novelist who was also a compulsive liar, how much credibility should one assigns to the account of Libertalia? The most elaborate discussion of this point is to be found in Anne Molet-Sauvaget's unpublished doctoral thesis on Madagascar in the works of Daniel Defoe.[14] She first draws attention to some chronological or geographical inconsistencies. Although in these chapters Johnson-Defoe cautiously avoided providing any date, as he had done in the carefully documented biographies of the first volume, it is difficult to reconcile Tom Tew's historically attested death in 1696, in a fight with a Moorish ship in the Red Sea, and his involvement with the Republic of Libertalia, which according to Anne Molet-Sauvaget's interpretation of the fictional chronology of the episode is said to have taken place 1707. In the narrative, the bay of Diego-Suarez seems to have been located on the

north-western coast of Madagascar, whereas it lies in fact on the north-eastern side of the island; this mistake may be a result of Defoe's use of an erroneous map found in Flacourt's *Histoire de la grande isle Madagascar* (1661). Most of the elements considered by Deschamps as proofs of authenticity, such as the ethnological details on Madagascar natives, the wars between the Comorian islands of Moheli and Anjuan, the friendly attitude of the latter's inhabitants towards the English, may have been found in various contemporary travel books.[15]

All the "true" information used in the account of Libertalia could easily have been collected by any armchair traveller with a good library at hand. It must be remembered that Defoe was in many ways perfectly prepared for this task: he had an extensive knowledge of travel literature in general and a special interest in Madagascar, which is the setting of important episodes of some of his books, such as the second part of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Captain Singleton* (1720) and *A New Voyage round the World* (1724). Moreover, as a popular writer of novels of roguery on one hand, and as an economist on the other, he was also interested in pirate stories, which combined a documentary element on colonial trade with the thrill of "criminal biographies". These various fields of interest were gathered together in books inspired by the myth of the fabulous riches of the pirates of Madagascar, especially Avery's *The King of the Pirates; being an Account of the Fabulous Enterprises of Captain Avery, the Mock King of Madagascar* (1719), and also, ten years before, *The Life and Adventures of Capt. John Avery* (1709), whose alleged author, Adrian Van Broeck, might be an alias of Defoe. A playwright, Charles Johnson, drew the plot of a play *The successful Pirate,* staged in 1712, from this spurious account of Avery's exploits. It has been supposed, with some plausibility, that Defoe could have taken a mild revenge on this dishonest fellow-writer by using Johnson's name as the fictitious author of the *History of the Pirates*.

Thus we are led to the rather disappointing conclusion that, as Anne Molet-Sauvaget writes, "Misson and Caraccioli have never had the historical reality which Defoe tried to give them", and that the whole Libertalia affair, in the words of Maximilian E. Novak, is but one of Defoe's "most remarkable and neglected of fiction". The fact that Defoe succeeded in fooling the most qualified specialists of the geographic area and of the period is indeed a tribute to his genius as a writer, using, like in *Robinson Crusoe*, all the techniques of formal realism. Anticipating Barthes' modern conception of the *effet de réel*, Defoe's celebrated "circumstantial method" encloses the fictitious in the pseudo-real through the multiplication of "useless" details. A similar device is the simultaneous treatment of invented and historically attested characters: Misson and Caraccioli first serve on the ship of Captain Fourbin (or Forbin), a well-known French officer (1656-1733), and their destiny is closely interwoven with the life of one of the most notorious pirates of the time, Tom Tew. The strange narrative structure of the Libertalia episode, split up in two distant chapters (XX and XXIII) separated by the biographies of Bowen and Kid, through its apparent clumsiness, is both a literary trick to maintain suspense for the reader and a compositional device, since truth here is inserted within a framework of fiction. According to a very common method of authentication almost universally used in the utopian novels of the period, the whole account is allegedly borrowed from a manuscript written by Misson himself.



A GENERAL
HISTORY
OF THE
*Robberies and Murders*
Of the most notorious
PYRATES,
AND ALSO
Their *Policies, Diſcipline* and *Government*,
From their firſt RISE and SETTLEMENT in the Iſland of *Providence*, in 1717, to the preſent Year 1724.
WITH
The remarkable ACTIONS and ADVENTURES of the two Female Pyrates, *Mary Read* and *Anne Bonny*.
To which is prefix'd
An ACCOUNT of the famous Captain *Avery* and his Companions; with the Manner of his Death in *England*.
The Whole digeſted into the following CHAPTERS;
Chap. I. Of Captain *Avery*.
II. The Riſe of Pyrates.
III. Of Captain *Martel*.
IV. Of Captain *Bonnet*.
V. Of Captain *Thatch*.
VI. Of Captain *Vane*.
VII. Of Captain *Rackam*.
VIII. Of Captain *England*.
IX. Of Captain *Davis*.
X. Of Captain *Roberts*.
XI. Of Captain *Worley*.
XII. Of Captain *Lowther*.
XIII. Of Captain *Low*.
XIV. Of Captain *Evans*.
And their ſeveral Crews.
To which is added,
A ſhort ABSTRACT of the Statute and Civil Law, in Relation to PYRACY.
By Captain CHARLES JOHNSON.
LONDON, Printed for *Ch. Rivington* at the *Bible* and *Crown* in St. *Paul's Church-Yard*, *J. Lacy* at the *Ship* near the *Temple-Gate*, and *J. Stone* next the *Crown* Coffee-houſe the back of *Grey's-Inn*, 1724.

Title-page of the first edition of
*A General History of the Pyrates* (1974).





### Truth and Lies

All this, of course, does not prove that Libertalia was a fiction of the imagination - something that perhaps is too easily taken for granted by some Defoe scholars. As is obvious from *Robinson Crusoe*, where he used a number of mostly authentic sources, including the accounts of Selkirk's captivity in one of the Juan Fernandez islands, Defoe seldom invents everything; his conception of literature is rather a subtle blend of fact and fiction.

So what can be real in this Libertalia tale? Nothing, say those who have in vain ransacked libraries and archives in search of a pirate called Misson, unaware of this prefatory remark in the hero's biography: "His Father, whose true name he conceals [...]". Like "Captain Johnson", "Misson" cannot therefore be anything other than a pseudonym; this borrowed name is obviously of little use if we want to trace the person whom it designated, supposing he ever existed. The author here pretends to give a clue to his reader, but at the same time he manages to make it useless. This perverse and ironical strategy of deception is quite in the manner of Defoe.

But perhaps this pseudonym does really provide a clue, not of course as to the identity of a very hypothetical existing model for an imaginary pirate, but concerning some factual elements which may have inspired the utopian State of Libertalia. In Defoe's fiction indeed the choice of the characters' names is seldom left to chance: the name of *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, which is rather common as an English name and suggests the plain individuality of the hero, may also evoke for the author some autobiographical associations — a Timothy Cruso was a companion of Defoe's youth — and even symbolic religious overtones: the Latin root crux included in the name is perhaps a hint as to the interpretation of the book as a Puritan allegory.

We can assume that on Defoe's part the choice of the name of Misson for the founder of Libertalia responded to an intention. Which one? Let us remember that the character it designated was both the creator of an ideal state and a pirate. The name of Misson was borne at the time by an eminent member of the French community in London; it is quite unlikely that Defoe would not have been aware of his existence. François-Maximilien Misson, who had settled in London in 1685, when Calvinism was officially banned from France, was a noted man of letters, the author of a very well-known *Nouveau Voyage d'Italie* (1691) which was widely read all over Europe until the mid-18th century. He was also an important member of the Huguenot community, who played a central part, as from 1707, in the affair of the so-called "French prophets", whose preachings won over many followers from among English audiences.[16]

Misson's name, it is true, does not appear even in the most recent biographies of Defoe,[17] and there is no evidence that the two men actually met, so that the choice of this identity for the fictitious character of the History of the Pirates might appear as a meaningless coincidence: there was apparently little in common between F.M. Misson and Defoe, except a shared interest in travel literature. But, like his imaginary homonym, F.M. Misson was connected with a curious historical episode involving a colonial project for a utopian state. This ideal commonwealth was not situated in Madagascar, like the Republic of Libertalia, but in the Mascarene islands, that is in a neighbouring geographical area. Moreover, on this occasion F.M. Misson's name became connected, in public opinion, with a suspected case of forgery or even literary piracy.

At the end of 1707, a book entitled *Voyage et aventures de François Leguat et de ses compagnons en deux îles désertes des Indes orientales*,[18] was published, in London and Amsterdam, and was immediately translated into English, Dutch and German. The authenticity and authorship of this travel account have been strongly questioned since its appearance. Leguat's tribulations in Rodrigues and the Mauritius islands seemed too romantic to be true, and his testimony about the extinct fauna of the Mascarenes was generally dismissed by 18th century scientists as spurious or at best unreliable. In 1922, an American scholar, Geoffroy Atkinson, after a close examination of Leguat's narrative, came to the conclusion that it was a pure novel in the manner of those of Veiras and Tyssot de Patot, an "extraordinary voyage" cleverly built up from various authentic travel accounts, and that Leguat was an entirely fictitious character.[19]

Endorsing an already largely accepted tradition, he attributed this "desert island novel" — a potential source of *Robinson Crusoe*, published twelve years later — to F.M. Misson, known from the beginning to have been the editor of the book and the author of its preface. Indeed, no doubt is possible on this last point: the preface, written with Misson's customary harsh irony and polemic spirit, is full of personal attacks against his literary enemies, especially those who had criticized his *Nouveau voyage d'Italie*. But, if Misson's contribution to Leguat's narrative cannot be denied, it has recently been proved that this work had a strong factual basis

and cannot be considered as a fictitious novel. Leguat's existence, the reality of his adventures and the general truth of his account are amply testified to by external evidence, particularly by the correspondence of the governor of Mauritius found in the Archives of Cape Town, although some incidents are blurred or embellished.[20]

Therefore, like the *History of the Pyrates*, the Voyage de François Leguat appeared, when it was published, as a work of disputed authenticity and dubious authorship. Misson, whose part in the editing of the original is difficult to determine exactly, was designated in contemporary reviews either as an impudent liar imposing upon the public under a false identity, or as an "alien hand" responsible for the disfigurement of Leguat's narrative. According to the most probable explanation for the identity of the fictitious author of the *History of the Pyrates*, Defoe had invented his "Captain Johnson" as an ironical revenge on Charles Johnson, by whom he had been plagiarized. In order to impersonate an imaginary pirate, Defoe perhaps chose the name of a man who had played an ambiguous role in Leguat's editing and had been accused of literary piracy. This is however merely a hypothetical explanation.

But one could state here that Misson was apparently blamed for was a common practice by Defoe himself in many of his works, as appears for example, not to leave the Indian Ocean, in his book *Madagascar, or Robert Drury's Journal* (1729): using Drury's identity as well as his observations on his fifteen years captivity in Madagascar, Defoe turns a basically authentic travel account into an exotic novel.[21] These ironical games with fictitious identities, imaginary authorships and intricate plays between truth and falsehood,


RECUEIL
DE
QUELQUES MÉMOIRES
SERVANS
D'INSTRUCTION
pour l'Etablissement
DE L'ISLE D'EDEN
A AMSTERDAM,
chez Henry Desbordes, dans
le Kalver-Straat, près le Dam.
M. DC. LXXXIX.

Title page of Duquesne's booklet

which blur each other's respective limits, are part of the literary custom of the time They appear as its specific contribution to a reflection on the ontological status of fiction, if one may say so, shared by writers as different as Defoe and Swift. For instance, Gulliver's "cousin Sympson", the supposed editor of Swift's philosophical tale, owes his name to a cryptic allusion to a literary forgery – in 1715 under that imaginary identity a spurious *Voyage to the East Indies* , a compilation of various plagiarized sources, was published. If "Sympson" was little qualified to guarantee the reality of Gulliver's adventures, he was certainly an appropriate choice as a voice in a book whose real subject is the question of truth and falsehood. As an editor of Leguat's book, F.M. Misson, indulges in the same ironical games. Usurping Leguat's identity in the preface of the *Voyage et aventures,* he comments upon the old literary topos about travellers and travel "liars" — *A beau mentir qui vient de loin*" as the proverb goes — similarly casting an auto-destructive doubt on the nature of the narrative.22

It seems clear that Defoe and F.M. Misson shared a concept of literature as a more or less predatory — if not piratical — activity, writing under borrowed names or appropriating other's narratives, using authentic factual elements as material for the building up of fictions, or disguising fiction as some form of documentary evidence. In this light, Misson's impersonation as a Madagascar pirate appears more as a humoristic effort than as a satirical attack.

### The Leguat Case and the Utopian Process

But the main convergent element which justifies the link between the two Missons — Defoe's fictitious character and the real editor of Leguat's *Voyage* — is of course to be found in the utopian enterprise with which both were associated, although in different ways.

The whole Leguat affair offers an extraordinary and probably unique illustration of the various forms and levels of colonial utopianism, from the initial stage of the elaboration of a socio-political project for an ideal state in an Indian Ocean island, to its effective and very different attempt at realization through Leguat's expedition in Rodrigues island, corresponding to a second phase of the utopian process, the actualized or concrete Utopia. A third step, leading towards narrative Utopia or the utopian novel, is opened by Leguat's rendering of this colonial experience (probably more or less altered by Misson's interventions), which may be considered as a semi-fictitious text rather than as a purely documentary account.

The first level, the utopian project of an ideal state, is only hinted at in Leguat's book, but is expounded at length in a very rare pamphlet of 1689, Henri Duquesne's *Recueil de quelques mémoires servant d'instruction pour l'établissement de l'île d'Eden*. Duquesne,[23] the son of a famous admiral of Louis XIV, had been compelled to exile like many French Protestants. With the support of the Dutch authorities and especially the *Oost-Indische Compagnie*, already implanted at the Cape of Good Hope, Batavia and Japan, he devised a project for a national homeland for French Huguenot refugees, located, in the terms of his propaganda pamphlet, in the "island of Eden", in fact Bourbon island (La Réunion), as revealed in the last pages. This name is not only in keeping with Duquesne's paradisiacal description of the island, which he compiled from various travel accounts in the Mascarenes; it also suggests the idea of a return to origins, a break with all the injustice and violence of the old world and an opening of a new era, a reconstruction of society on a different basis.

### Isle of Eden

Duquesne's "Republic of the Isle of Eden" is much more complex and elaborate than Misson's and Caraccioli's Republic of Libertalia, and would deserve a study of its own. The political organization of the colony rests upon a mixed government combining, like the Sevarite State in Veiras' book, despotism, oligarchy and democracy, thus avoiding, explains Duquesne, "the drawbacks which are to be found in monarchies and republics". An elected chief of state — Duquesne himself, it is suggested — will assume power through an administrative hierarchy of magistrates and officers with the help of a Senate of twelve members, but the people had to be consulted on all important issues and given the right to make proposals and publicly express grievances. All this was combined with a very advanced social policy of public assistance. However, the absence of an economic basis was the great weakness of the project, which, unlike Misson's republic, could not rely upon the profits of piracy. Mainstream religious ideology also opposed the strong Christian Calvinist character of Duquesne's ideal state, in which Duquesne sees himself as a new Moses guiding the Huguenot elected People towards the Promised Land.

Duquesne's project for an ideal state, in its realised form, became an unsuccessful and scaled-down attempt on the then desert island of Rodrigues, the smallest of the Mascarene islands, where Legaut spent two years (1691-1693) with a little reconnaissance party. It appears that it the "actual" Utopia was much less idyllic than what Leguat's narrative had claimed. Some discreet hints scattered in his account, and above all the evidence found in the correspondence of Diodati, the Dutch governor of Mauritius, where the little group's adventures later continued, suggest that among the settlers there was an atmosphere of suspicion and personal conflicts, sharpened by the decision of the majority to leave the insular paradise, in spite of Leguat's opposition. Duquesne's utopian project had doubly failed, firstly because it did not succeed in attracting a significant number of potential colonists — not more than eight men finally took part in the Rodrigues Island experience — and secondly because, notwithstanding the material richness of the place and the beauty of its natural setting, life freed from the vicissitudes and turmoils of history soon revealed itself unbearably boring. Those who left risked their lives in a dangerous crossing to Mauritius on a small boat rather than "wasting the finest of their days in an alien solitude and in a destructive idleness".

Leguat's narrative, or rather its rewriting by F.M. Misson, may be referred to a third utopian mode. It gives a reconstructed, dramatized and probably much embellished version of the real events. The conflicts between the colonists have been toned down, much emphasis has been laid on the beautiful landscapes of the island, the descriptive elements are mixed up with an ideological overtones on the corruption of social life and the freedom and happiness of solitude, a discourse which obviously must be attributed to Misson rather than to Leguat. Although most of the facts are true and can easily be checked, the book is less a documentary travel account than a kind of utopian novel.

Besides being a colonial attempt and a utopian construction, Leguat's experience — at least

seen through its narrative reconstruction — is extremely original. The whole island is the garden of Eden before the Fall, where a plentiful living is offered to man without any work, as in the land of Cockaigne "wherever you may be, if there is no game, you just have to knock on a tree or to shout as loud as you can, and the game hears this noise and comes running immediately".

Instead of trying to humanize nature through work, according to the usual colonial practice, man is here integrated in the natural world. Legaut's construct is poles apart from the carefully organized institutional system of Duquesne, with its complex apparatus of laws, rules, magistrates and hierarchies. Leguat, sending, as he says, "man to the school of beasts", develops the ideal of what might be called a "natural society", without money, private property, laws, or inequality. As in Foigny's Utopia, this insular community has no supra-individual political structures, no institutions or government of any kind: the shade of a big tree is "the Town-Hall or if you prefer the meeting-point of the Republic", but there "the main deliberations were about the cooking". This stateless micro-society affords the "eight kings of Rodrigues" both full individual sovereignty and perfect collective harmony — a living diametrically opposed to European society where "everything, so to say, is but error, vanity, disorder, corruption, malice and misery".

This anarchic dream of complete political freedom in an Arcadian setting is not very different from the aspirations, associated with the pirates, towards an unhampered way of life in faraway countries where European laws are no longer applicable. Both in fact are reconstructed writers' dreams rather than faithful echoes of the real situations as experienced by those who lived them. We know very little of the aspirations and resentments which drove the pirates across the seas towards a brutal and lawless existence. Misson and Caraccioli, who justified it as a deliberate political choice and turned it into a positive utopian model, are but fictitious characters. Leguat certainly existed, but how far is he responsible for the book published under his name? The anarchic model of insular existence depicted in his narrative, so different from Duquesne's utopian project to which it gave its sole realization, is probably no less different from what was his actual experience during his two years' stay in Rodrigues. These utopian elements associated with pirate stories and colonial ventures belong to Defoe, Duquesne or F.M. Misson, who never left Europe. In keeping with its etymology (*outopos*, "no place"), Utopia is the fictional presence of an absence.

## Notes

1. Christopher Hill has shown that a significant number of "dissenters" and members of the most radical sects of the English Revolution became pirates in the West Indies after 1650. See "Radical Pirates?". In *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill*, Vol. III, the University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.
2. Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715*, Paris, Fayard, 1961.
3. French title: *Histoire des Sévarambes, Peuples qui habitent une partie du troisième continent, communément appelé la Terre Australe* [...].
4. James Harrington's *Oceana* was published in 1656.
5. On this utopian literature, see our study *L'utopie narrative en France et en Angleterre, 1675-1761*, Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1991.
6. A modern critical edition has been published by Manuel Schonhorn (Daniel Defoe, *A General History of the Pyrates*, edited by Manuel Schonhorn, London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1972). We quote from this edition, which reproduces the original text. A French translation has also been published recently (Daniel Defoe, *Histoire générale des plus fameux pirates* (translated by H. Thiès et G. Villeneuve, with a preface by Michel Le Bris) Paris, Payot, 1992, 2 vol.).
7. On the main themes of libertine thought at the time, see John S. Sprink, *La libre-pensée de Gassendi à Voltaire*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1966.
8. Hubert Deschamps, *Les Pirates à Madagascar aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1949.
9. Pierre Vérin, *Les échelles anciennes du commerce sur les côtes nord de Madagascar*, Université de Lille III, Service de Reproduction des Thèses, 1975, t. II, p. 718.
10. Auguste Toussaint, *L'Océan Indien au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Flammarion, 1974 (on Libertalia, see pp.52 and 57).
11. Gilles Lapouge, *Les Pirates*, Paris, Balland, 1976 (1st ed. 1969), pp. 51-59.
12. J.R. Moore, *Defoe in the Pillory and other studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1939.
13. Philip Nicholas Furbank in *The Canonization of Daniel Defoe*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, is very critical about Moore's bibliographical methods and criteria of attribution, especially concerning the *General History of the Pyrates*.
14. Anne Molet-Sauvaget, *Madagascar dans l'œuvre de Daniel Defoe: étude de la contribution de cet auteur à l'histoire de l'île* (Thèse de Doctorat d'Etat, Université de Dijon, 1989, microfiches).
15. For example Ovington's *Voyage to Suratt* (1696), Mandelslo's *Voyages and travels into the East Indies* (1669), Cornwall's *Observations upon several voyages to India and China* (1720), etc.
16. F.M. Misson published several books and pamphlets in defence of the "Inspirés", including *Le théâtre sacré des Cévennes* (English translation: *A cry from the Desert*). See Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets, the History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, The University of California Press, 1980.
17. See for example Paula Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe, his Life*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
18. See our critical edition of this book, published under the title of *Aventures aux Mascareignes* (Paris, La Découverte, 1984).
19. Geoffroy Atkinson, *The Extraordinary Voyage in French Literature from 1700 to 1720*, Paris, Champion, 1922.
20. On all these points, see Alfred North-Coombes, *The Vindication of François Leguat*, Port-Louis (Mauritius), 1979, and the introduction to our edition of Leguat's *Voyage*.
21. The main elements of information can be found in Anne Molet-Sauvaget's critical edition of the French version of this text (Daniel Defoe, *Madagascar ou le Journal de Robert Drury;* traduction critique par A. Molet-Sauvaget, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992).
22. On this *topos* in travel literature, see Percy G. Adams' *Travelers and Travel Liars, 1660-1800*, University of California Press, 1962. On Leguat, see pp. 100-103.
23. Reprinted as an appendix in our edition of Leguat. ■