

Robert Pomery, Christian captive of Algiers pirates

Checking some references during a recent spell when I had access to the Open University's online library resources I found a news report that intrigued me. Dated 24th February 1676, in the reign of Charles II, it was "A list of captives redeemed east of Argiers, by His Majesties Bounty, and at His Sole Charge, in the Months of December and January 1674/5, by Sir John Narborough, Mr Brisbatie and Mr Martin His Majesties Consul at Argiers" (note 1). In other words, it listed those men who had been captured by Barbary pirates who had subsequently been ransomed from the North African city state Algiers. To my astonishment, the last but one on the list of roughly two hundred names was a Robert Pomery.

Several books have been written in recent years about the predations of North African corsairs along the Channel coast – they roamed as far afield as Ireland and Iceland -- but this is the first known instance of a Pomeroy connection.

The History of Algiers

The Wikipedia entry for Algiers gives us the background to the piratical activity which for several centuries sent shivers through parents' hearts from Cornwall to Hampshire.

"In 1510, following their occupation of Oran and other towns on the coast of Africa, the Spaniards fortified the islet of Penon [in front of Algiers harbour]. In 1516, the amir of Algiers, Selim b. Teumi, invited the corsair brothers Aruj and Khair ad-Din Barbarossa to expel the Spaniards. Aruj came to Algiers, ordered the assassination of Selim, and seized the town. Khair ad-Din, succeeding Arouj after the latter was killed in battle against the Spaniards at Tlemcen, was the founder of the pashaluk, which subsequently became the beylik, of Algeria after formally inviting the Sultan to accept sovereignty over the territory and to annex Algiers to the Ottoman Empire.

Algiers from this time became the chief seat of the Barbary pirates. In October 1541, the King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sought to capture the city, but a storm destroyed a great number of his ships, and his army of some 30,000, chiefly made up of Spaniards, was defeated by the Algerians under their Pasha, Hassan. Formally part of the Ottoman Empire but essentially free from Ottoman control, starting in the 17th century Algiers turned to piracy and ransoming. Due to its location on the periphery of both the Ottoman and European economic spheres, and depending for its existence on a Mediterranean that was increasingly controlled by European shipping, backed by European navies, piracy became the primary economic activity. Repeated attempts were made by various nations to subdue the pirates that disturbed shipping in the western Mediterranean and engaged in slave raids as far north as Cornwall" (note 2).

Nemesis: Narborough & Pellew

The entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for Sir John Narborough notes: "Attacks on English shipping by north African corsairs forced the government of Charles II to send large squadrons into the Mediterranean on a regular basis, and on 18 October 1674 Narborough was commissioned to command such a force, still flying his flag in the *Henrietta*. His objective was to obtain a peace with Tripoli, and he maintained a blockade of that port throughout 1675. Narborough moved to the *Harwich* in December 1675, employing her as his flagship on 14 January 1676 during a bold attack on four ships in Tripoli harbour itself (an attack commanded by his lieutenant and Norfolk protégé Cloudesley Shovell), and subsequently during a successful engagement at sea with another four major Tripolitan warships. Narborough signed a treaty with Tripoli on 5 March 1676 and returned to England in September. [...] Hostilities with Algiers resumed almost immediately and Narborough received another commission to command in the Mediterranean on 30 June 1677, this time with the *Plymouth* as his flagship, and was given the title of admiral by a commission of 15 February 1678. The change in status reflected the expansion of his fleet from eight vessels to thirty-five, but despite these numbers Narborough had little success. The strength of the Algerine

forces, and his own difficulties with supplying and refitting his ships, made it difficult to pursue an effective strategy, and Narbrough's decision to place his fleet before Algiers in impressive shows of force has been criticized for diverting ships from more directly useful defence of convoys. Narbrough's fleet returned to England in the summer of 1679 and was paid off" (note 3).

I've not had time to research this fascinating period of history, but the catalogue of The National Archives in Kew notes that "Muslims from the Barbary States (North African countries such as Algiers and Tunisia) frequently raided coastal villages and towns, especially in southern Britain, to enslave people, and there are many references to redeeming Christian slaves in the State Papers records" . Access to Archives (A2A), the directory of archives' catalogues in the UK, lists the papers of Henry Coventry, held in Longleat House and the British Library, as primary sources. Coventry was a leading statesman and fixer in Charles II's reign. In 1673 he became an Admiralty commissioner and also a commissioner for Tangier, in September 1674 -- three months before the first English slaves were released -- transferring to the secretaryship for the southern department, making him the senior of the two British Secretaries of State and responsible for relations with Muslim states.

American Expeditions

American readers may recall that the young USA also had issues with the Dey of Algiers who was not shy in ransoming American ships, from 1783 no longer under British or French protection. After Thomas Jefferson's inauguration as president in 1801 the pasha of Tripoli demanded \$225,000 from the new administration. Long opposed to ransom payments, Jefferson refused, the pasha then impudently declaring war on the USA, the first it fought under its independent constitution. The first Barbary War ended inconclusively. In the second in 1815 American forces captured and ransomed Algerian captives back to the Dey in return for a treaty outlawing tribute demands, a deal the Dey repudiated the day the Americans left.

In the end it was the British who dealt with the Dey. As part of the peace dividend after the Battle of Waterloo, the British navy sent a huge force to North Africa. In 1816, the city was approached by a British squadron under Lord Exmouth, assisted by Dutch men-of-war. Sending an uncompromising message ashore demanding total unconditional surrender within one hour., after receiving no reply his eighteen men-of-war fired some 50,000 cannon balls into Algiers, almost completely levelling it, as well as firing the corsair fleet in the harbour. At this the Dey surrendered unconditionally and released all the remaining Christian slaves.

The best single book to gain a flavour I know of is *White Gold* by Giles Milton. This is built around the story of a young Cornish cabin-boy, Thomas Pellow, who with fifty-one of his companions in the summer of 1715 were captured at sea, and sold in the slave markets of Algiers, Tunis and Sale in Morocco. Amazingly, the man who finally destroyed the power of Algiers in 1816 was Sir Edward Pellow, later Lord Exmouth, was a collateral descendant of the same West Country family as Thomas Pellow.

Robert Pomery

So, who was Robert Pomery? Our project still has incomplete records in the period 1600-1750, so I can't hazard a guess at present. Pomeroy's were living close to the Channel coast from Mevagissey in Cornwall, to Brixham in Devon, and on to the Dorset coast. If we rely on the spelling of the surname, Pomery was the standard spelling in Cornwall but was also found in Dorset and Hampshire. We wait and see...

Notes

- (1) *London Gazette*, Thursday, February 24, 1676; Issue 1072 (Burney-Gale Archive)
- (2) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algiers>
- (3) www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19776

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