

Well-behaved women seldom make history – Anne Bonny profile

By [Elizabeth Jones](#)

Anne Bonny, the deadliest woman ever to sail the high seas



(Early 18th Century, the Golden Age of Piracy)

Pirates, ye be warned

Only the roughest and most adventurous men embarked on careers of piracy, but Anne Bonny would earn her place in history by becoming known as one of the fiercest female pirates ever to sail the seas.

One of the only documented women to sail under a jolly roger, or pirate flag, she threw caution to the wind and joined up with Captain “Calico Jack” Rackham, challenging the old sailor superstition that a woman’s presence aboard a ship invites bad luck.

Most of what is known of Bonny comes from *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (1724), written

by Capt. Charles Johnson, and is unsubstantiated.

Early life

Born in Ireland to a wealthy attorney and his family maid, Anne began her life the same way she lived it, unconventionally.

After his infidelity was revealed, Anne’s father separated from his wife and moved across the Pacific Ocean to a Charleston plantation with Anne and her mother. It was there Anne began establishing her ruthless reputation.

In one account, Anne stabbed a servant with a kitchen knife after having an argument. In another account, after a young man tried to force himself on her, she beat him so hard he was bedridden for weeks.

A pirate’s life for Anne

Against her father’s wishes, Anne eloped with a poor sailor named James Bonny. They sailed the Bahamas together and eventually made port in the pirate haven of New Providence, now Nassau. Their bliss was short lived however, as Anne soon became infatuated with the pirate “Calico Jack” Rackham.

Dropping Bonny for Rackham, Anne became pregnant with his child, gave birth in Cuba, then took to the seas to maraud the Caribbean alongside her new beau.

Anne's presence aboard Rackham's sloop the *William* was unconventional, as a woman's presence was seen as bad luck for ships. Although she didn't conceal her gender from shipmates, Encyclopedia Britannica states, "when pillaging she disguised herself as a man and participated in armed conflict."

However, one shipmate refused to accept her presence on board, and paid for his doubt with his life.

Armed to the teeth, Bonny defeated him in hand-to-hand combat, then tossed his corpse overboard. No other shipmates challenged her again.

An unexpected twist

A pirate's work is never done when there are spoils to plunder. One night, after taking a ship, Rackham offered crew positions to those who survived his attack as is customary among those who follow the pirate code of conduct.

One of the newly press-ganged shipmates who went by the name of Mark Reed stood out to

Bonny. Pressing further, she realized that "Mark" was actually a woman named Mary Read.



In a twist of surprising fate, Jack now had not one, but two women flying under his jolly roger.

Bonny and Read became fast friends. Fearless and skilled at arms, they took their pillaging and plundering to new heights and enjoyed a time of unprecedented success.

But the life of a pirate is fast, furious and short.

The final stand

In October of 1720 Rackham's ship captured a Spanish galleon laden with gold and treasure. While enjoying grog, rum, food, song and other spoils, Bonny and Read noticed an approaching sloop that could only mean one thing: prepare to be boarded.

Unfortunately, not a man among them was sober enough to fight back.

However the two women on board, Bonny and Read, were able to hold their liquor and set about making a stand. Frustrated with her inept shipmates, Bonny screamed at them, "Dogs! If instead of these weaklings I only had some women with me."

While Bonny and Read did everything they could, the ship was taken by the British Royal Navy.

The crew was taken to Port Royal to stand trial. While all were condemned to the gallows, Bonny and Read were spared the noose by revealing they were pregnant.

On the day Rackham and his crew were sentenced to death, Rackham used his last request to ask to see the mother of his child.

Upon meeting at his cell, Bonny scolded Rackham in their final conversation; "Jack, if you had fought like a man, you would not now be about to hang like a dog."

Although accounts differ after this point, reports suggest Read died in her cell the next year.

Bonny, however, seems to have been released from prison, likely due to her father's influence. Little is known what happened to her after this point, but according to Encyclopedia Britannica, "She returned to Charles Towne, where she married, had children, and lived out the remainder of her life." However, in the case of Anne Bonny, the mystique of her myth seems to have drawn more fascination than the concrete facts.