contribution to early modern history and should be read by all those concerned with the culture of the period.

Marion Gibson
University of Exeter, UK


When Henry G. Barnby published The Prisoners of Algiers in 1966, he referred to the first American-Algerian conflict of 1785–1797 as a “forgotten war.” There is today a striking regain of interest for the drawn-out conflict (1776–1815) commonly known as the Barbary Wars, between the young American republic and the Ottoman regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. Prompted by the emergence of political Islam in Middle Eastern and international politics and by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 particularly, a spate of new books about the old conflict has appeared recently, many of them showing a presentist inclination to draw links between America’s first contact with the Islamic world two centuries ago and her “War on Terror” today. Frederick C. Leiner’s book, which focuses on the concluding phase of the Barbary Wars, is one example of this literature.

As in 1776, Britain emboldened Algiers to attack American ships again during the War of 1812, resulting in the capture of the brig Edwin with a crew of eleven. President Madison instructed Consul Mordecai Noah to redeem the captives, but, since the Dey of Algiers proved inflexible about the ransom, Madison declared war and dispatched a naval squadron to the Mediterranean under the command of Stephen Decatur, hero of the US-Tripolitan War of 1801–1805. A splendid little war it was for the United States. The showdown with Algiers, the strongest Barbary power, was practically a no-show, at best a military promenade. The Algiers navy was, in the words of one American sailor, “a mere burlesque” (p. 113). Quickly smothered by the American squadron, Algiers’s unique battleship Meshuda surrendered in 25 minutes. The high-sounding Barbary War of 1815 claimed only one American loss to enemy fire, while a couple more sailors died from the bursting of their cannon; in his log, Decatur “spent more ink on the bursting of the cannon than he did on the battle itself” (p. 101). Decatur inaugurated “American gunboat diplomacy” (p. 129) by dictating the terms of peace with Algiers and proceeding (in what Leiner calls “unfinished business”) to wrest similar treaties with Tunis and Tripoli, although no state of war existed between the latter regencies and the United States.

Leiner builds a vivid narrative of those events, complete with the classic Barbary literature opening that dramatizes a chase and capture on the high seas. No account of the actual capture of the Edwin exists, but Leiner imagines it on the basis of analogy with similar events. Leiner then presents “the four Barbary regencies . . . nominally subject to the rule of the Ottoman sultan at
Constantinople” (Morocco, however, was never a part of the Ottoman Empire),
the previous war against Tripoli, and the failure of Noah’s mission. Chapters 2
and 3 give short biographies of the main characters of the drama (including
Secretary of the Navy Benjamin W. Crowninshield, Commodore Decatur, and
several other officers) and describe the naval squadron and its arsenal in great
detail. Chapters 4 and 5 narrate step by step the squadron’s victory against the
Meshuda and the completion of “unfinished business” with Tunis and Tripoli.
Chapter 6 offers a glimpse of the triumphal return of Decatur’s squadron. The
last chapter chronicles the decisive follow-up by Britain in 1816, with Lord
Exmouth’s bombardment of Algiers, his show of force before Tunis and Tripoli,
and the definitive termination of Christian slavery in the three regencies, while
African slavery in America (which involved Muslim slaves) remained a “far
more intractable problem” (p. 175).

This book has two interpretive dimensions. First, it fits the traditional historio-
graphy of the Barbary Wars and argues the traditional interpretation that the
United States played a glorious role in initiating the suppression of the regencies’
corsairs, tribute system, and white slavery. Leiner’s tone and prose are also typi-
cally celebratory, occasionally lapsing into hyperbole (as when he calls the
voyage of the Edwin an “odyssey” or William Eaton’s march on Derna an
“epic”) and missing a good opportunity to discuss the myth-creating process in
nationalist discourse. In this respect, Leiner’s book brings no novelty of terrain
or interpretation. Its contribution rather lies in focus and micro-history. Most pre-
vious books about the Barbary Wars have covered Decatur’s expedition of 1815
(and the British expedition that followed), but no one has devoted an entire
book to it. Drawing upon government documents and archives, ship logs,
private journals, and secondary sources, complemented with maps, lithographs,
and portraits, Leiner’s book is brimming with detail about the naval expedition
and about naval life and consular activities in the early nineteenth century. It
even draws on the love letters of sailors, whose sentimental stories are cleverly
used to highlight their dangerous mission in distant places. Statistics of Christian
slaves in Barbary, however, seem to merit closer attention, because the author
settles for the highest estimates rather uncritically: “at least one million, and
perhaps as many as one and one-quarter million” during the “peak period of
slave-taking” from 1530 to 1780. Such statistics would seem greatly exaggerated
if Algiers, the “great depot” of Christian slaves,” held only 30,000 captives in
the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (pp. 2, 13).

Then there is the post-9/11 interpretation, a rather tenuous stretch. By
suggesting similarities and even continuities between the war against “Barbary
terror” at the turn of the nineteenth century and the “War on Terror” today,
Leiner takes the risk of anachronism, oversimplification, and ideological strain.
The “unfinished business” with Tunis and Tripoli is meant to evoke the “unfin-
ished business” with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Leiner also digs up an anecdote
about a “weapon of mass destruction” (sulfur gas) which had proven lethal on
animals and had been suggested as a means to “smoke the barbarians,” but
which the American government refrained from using (p. 188). More important
is the suggestion of a fundamental link between Islam and terrorism and of a cultural continuity of jihadism. Leiner insists on calling the old pirates jihadists, although he admits that they differ from present-day jihadists who have the explicit political goal of restoring the caliphate. He says that seizures of ships from Christian countries were essentially “an article of faith, part of the jihad against nonbelievers” (pp. 2, 13). Leiner here is recycling an old, essentialist interpretation of piracy that ran from the seventeenth century all the way to Stanley Lane-Poole in 1890, but which has been discarded by modern historians. Fernand Braudel, notably, has discredited the cultural interpretation of piracy and its attendant cruelties while acknowledging the role of religion in mutual perception. Braudel has also demonstrated that the terror of piracy and slavery was not particular to Barbary; it was common practice in the entire Mediterranean (and elsewhere), and several European cities were Christendom’s Algiers. On the other hand, the Barbary States were frequently in alliance with one Christian power or another in the cut-throat commercial competition of the times, as evidenced by the British-Algerian alliance in 1776 and again in 1812. Leiner admits at one point: “In fact, the entire Barbary enterprise was regulated by foreign nations” (pp. 13–14). On a more individual level, Rais Hamidou, Algiers’s “legendary corsair” and “most famous captain,” was not exactly a typical jihadist. The daughter of the British Consul had described him as “not the most rigid observer of the [Koran],” but rather as someone who “sometimes chanced to drop in . . . and never was so bigoted and unsocial as to refuse . . . a few glasses of Madeira” (p. 92). On the larger level of Algerian society, US Consul William Shaler had concurred that “nothing” about the Algerines “suggested extraordinary bigotry, fanaticism, or hatred of those who professed a different religion” (p. 17). Ditto for Tunis: after landing there without having to fire a shot, Decatur’s officers relaxed in a Turkish bath, then strolled amidst the ruins of Carthage, and “like any tourists bought gifts, shawls, pipes” (p. 134). Visibly, the atmosphere in Tunis savoured more of tourism than of terrorism. As for the condition of the American captives in Algiers, nothing suggests that they suffered from anti-Christian fanaticism, as “word filtered back to America that the Edwin captives were lodged in foreign consulates and supplied with many of the comforts and conveniences of life, through the liberality of their fellow citizens” (pp. 8, 24, 25). Ultimately, at the level of foreign policy, Leiner uses the Barbary example to make a case for unilateralism, which he promotes as “one of the original and enduring principles of American foreign policy” (p. 48). However, if American unilateralism in 1815 was a legitimate and successful reaction to provocation, it is doubtful that the policy of unilateral interventionism today could reasonably be viewed in the same way.

Lotfi Ben Rejeb

*University of Ottawa*