



She Captains: Heroines and Hellions of the Sea

Joan Druett

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*With her pistols loaded she went aboard
And by her side hung a glittering sword
In her belt two daggers, well armed for war
Was this female smuggler
Was this female smuggler who never feared a scar.*

If a "hen frigate" was any ship carrying a captain's wife, then a "she captain" is a bold woman distinguished for courageous enterprise in the history of the sea. "She captains," who infamously possessed the "bodies of women and the souls of men," thrilled and terrorized their shipmates, doing "deeds beyond the valor of women." Some were "bold and crafty pirates with broadsword in hand." Others were sirens, too, like the Valkyria Princess Alfhild, whom the mariners made rover-captain for her beauty. Like their male counterparts, these astonishing women were drawn to the ocean's beauty -- and its danger.

In her inimitable, yarn-spinning style, award-winning historian Joan Druett tells us what life was like for the women who dared to captain ships of their own, don pirates' garb, and perform heroic and hellacious deeds on the high seas. We meet Irish raider Grace "Grania" O'Malley -- sometimes called "the bald Grania" because she cut her hair short like a boy's -- who commanded three galleys and two hundred fighting men. Female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read were wanted by the law. Armed to the teeth with cutlasses and pistols, they inspired awe and admiration as they swaggered about in fancy hats and expensive finery, killing many a man who cowered cravenly before them.

Lovelorn Susan "Put on a jolly sailor's dress/And daubed her hands with tar/To cross the raging sea/On board a man of war" to be near her William. Others disguised themselves for economic reasons. In 1835, Ann Jane Thornton signed on as a ship's steward to earn the fair wage of nine dollars per month. When it was discovered that she was a woman, the captain testified that Jane was a capital sailor, but the crew had been suspicious of her from the start, "because she would not drink her grog like a regular seaman."

In 1838, twenty-two-year-old Grace Darling led the charge to rescue nine castaways from the wreck of the *Forfarshire* (the *Titanic* of its day). "I'll save the crew!" she cried, her courageous pledge immortalized in a torrent of books, songs, and poems. Though "she captains" had been sailing for hundreds of years by the turn of the twentieth century, Scotswoman Betsey Miller made headlines by weathering "storms of the deep when many commanders of the other sex have been driven to pieces on the rocks."

From the warrior queens of the sixth century B.C. to the women shipowners influential in opening the Northwest Passage, Druett has assembled a real-life cast of characters whose boldness and bravado will capture popular imagination. Following the arc of maritime history from the female perspective, *She Captains'* intrepid crew sails forth into a sea of adventure.

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