

Franklin's Privateers

by Eric Jay Dolin

The heroic exploits of the American navy during the Revolutionary War have been researched, analyzed, and told and retold before, yet most histories of the American War for Independence fail to acknowledge the pivotal role of privateering vessels, from 20-foot whaleboats to 40-gun men-of-war, that truly revealed the new nation's character, and, above all, its ambition and entrepreneurial ethos. In Eric Jay Dolin's latest book, *Rebels at Sea*, he corrects that significant omission, and contends that privateers, though often seen as profiteers at best and pirates at worst, were in fact critical to the war's outcome. Armed with cannons, swivel guns, muskets, and pikes—as well as government documents granting them the right to seize enemy ships—thousands of privateers tormented the British on the broad Atlantic and in bays and harbors on both sides of the ocean. Abounding with tales of daring maneuvers and deadly encounters, *Rebels at Sea* presents the American Revolution as we have rarely seen it before.

In this excerpt, Dolin sheds light on the role that Benjamin Franklin played in harassing British shipping in the waters surrounding Great Britain by issuing letters of marque from his post in France. In theory, he was only permitted to engage with American ships, but through some sleight of hand on Franklin's part, the sly and scheming American diplomat managed to issue letters of marque to foreign-owned vessels with foreign-manned crews.

Luke Ryan, a pale, slight, twenty-nine-year-old Irishman, was in trouble. A successful smuggler of goods in the mid-1770s, operating between Dunkirk and his hometown, Rush, about fifteen miles north of Dublin, he had decided to change course and become a British privateersman, tasked with attacking American, French, and Spanish shipping. In late February 1779, Captain Ryan headed out on his first privateering cruise,

on the cutter *Friendship*, with a crew of sixty and fourteen cannons. But he couldn't shake his old ways. He returned to Rush in April with no prize but plenty of contraband—French brandy and Dutch tea. Customs inspectors seized the *Friendship*, brought it to Dublin, and threw much of the crew into the Black Dog prison. Ryan was not among them—he had already gone ashore. Ryan had no intention of giving himself up or letting his men face justice.

He concocted a plan and executed it in the early morning hours of April 12. Assisted by armed men he had sent, his crew broke



Captain Luke Ryan, c. 1782

Benjamin Franklin, 1778

by Joseph Duplessis

Inventor, printer, philosopher, publisher, diplomat, patriot: Benjamin Franklin was the only Founding Father to sign all four documents critical to the creation of the United States: The Declaration of Independence (1776), the Treaty of Alliance with France (1778), the Treaty of Paris (1783) and the US Constitution (1787). In his diplomatic role while in France, he authorized privateers to prey upon British shipping.

SEA HISTORY 180, AUTUMN 2022

out of the Black Dog. Commandeering a few boats, they rowed out to the *Friendship*, overpowered the nine customs guards on board, cut the anchor cable, raised the sails, and sailed out of the harbor. Farther up the coast, Ryan's men rowed the guards ashore and gave them each a guinea to cover the cost of their journey back to Dublin. The next stop was Rush, where Ryan was waiting.

Once aboard the *Friendship*, Ryan began implementing the second phase of his plot. Smuggling was bad enough on its own, but now that his men had escaped from prison, made off with the *Friendship*, and wounded a few customs guards, there was no staying in Ireland. They were wanted men, and if captured would certainly be tried for piracy and probably hanged. The alternative Ryan had chosen, and which his men had agreed to, was to sail to Dunkirk to become "American" privateersmen.

Ryan had many connections in Dunkirk, a famous smuggling depot. Soon after arriving on the *Friendship*, now renamed the *Black Prince*, he contacted Jean and Charles Torris, Flemish businessmen who had supplied him with contraband in the past. Ryan proposed that the brothers purchase a 50 percent stake in the *Black Prince* and that they turn it into a privateer. A deal was struck. The Flemish brothers thought it would be easiest to secure a privateering commission from the French. Ryan demurred, fearing that if the *Black Prince* was stopped or captured, a crew comprised almost entirely of Irishmen could never pass for French. He had another idea. He had heard that Benjamin Franklin was interested in commissioning American privateers to sail from France—so why not ask him? Ryan and his men could certainly pretend to be American if they had to. The Torris brothers tapped connections who knew Franklin. They learned that the famous American was not allowed to grant privateering commissions to vessels captained by foreigners, much less Irish smugglers. The captain, at least, had to be American. Luckily for Ryan and his partners, Stephen Marchant, a Connecticut shipmaster, was in Dunkirk at that very moment and looking for a command.



Model of Luke Ryan's *Black Prince* (ex-*Friendship*)

A meeting was arranged, and Ryan concluded that Marchant was a weak-willed and easily manipulated man with an out-sized ego whom they could use for their purposes. He would be presented to Franklin as captain, and another Connecticut man, Jonathan Arnold, would be offered as first mate, but in reality Ryan would be in charge. (Marchant and Arnold would not be privy to this fact.) Franklin met Marchant and granted the privateering commission—less because of his confidence in Marchant than because he wanted to help repatriate privateersmen and sailors from the Continental navy wasting away in British prisons.

Ever since arriving in France, Franklin had been disturbed by the idea of his countrymen languishing in British jails and had worked tirelessly to secure their release. His only real hope was to arrange for cartels, whereby British prisoners held in France were exchanged for Americans held in Britain. But there were two problems. First, British authorities were reluctant to release any prisoners, regardless of the circumstances. When Franklin had first approached Lord Stormont with the idea of conducting a prisoner swap, he had received a biting and dismissive reply from the British ambassador to France: "The King's

ambassadors receive no applications from rebels, unless they come to implore his Majesty's mercy." Second, the number of American prisoners in Britain was far greater than the number of British ones in France.

Not long before Luke Ryan's arrival in Dunkirk, Franklin had finally persuaded the British to agree to a cartel, and a single ship had delivered nearly one hundred Americans to freedom in France. Franklin expected there would be additional cartels, but for that to happen he would need more British prisoners to trade. This is where privateers entered his thinking. In granting commissions such as the one given to Marchant, he hoped that the privateers would come back not only with prizes but also loaded with prisoners he could use as bargaining chips.

Across the spring and summer of 1779, the *Black Prince* sailed on four cruises, capturing thirty-four prizes. The privateer also returned with more than fifty prisoners. Franklin had wanted more, but many potential prisoners had been allowed to depart with ransomed¹ prizes, because Ryan did not want to be bothered with manning the prize ships and sending them to Dunkirk.

Wherever the *Black Prince* struck along the coasts of England, Wales, Scotland,

and Ireland, it left a terrorized local populace. A resident of Newquay, England, wrote to a friend after one of Ryan's raids on local shipping, during which thirteen vessels had been taken within sight of the town's harbor: "We are all in vast alarm here, for two nights the soldiers have been under arms." Local officials pleaded with the Admiralty to send ships to protect them, complaining that the coast was "totally defenseless, there not being one King's ship stationed between Bristol and Land's End."

During the first three cruises, it became clear to everyone, except, somewhat shockingly, Marchant, that Ryan was the true captain and the American, a figurehead. Ryan gave orders that his Irish crew heeded, and more than a few paroled prisoners told authorities that they were certain Ryan, not Marchant, was actually in charge. By the fourth cruise, in September, Ryan could act no more. He despised the incompetent Marchant and told him the truth of his situation, that his position was a mirage. Marchant was despondent over the loss of the captaincy, but he stayed on board, quietly sulking, until the *Black Prince* returned to Dunkirk at the end of the month, after which he returned to America.

When Franklin was finally told about the trickery, and that all along the Irish

smuggler Ryan had been the real captain, he was amused and accepting. He even congratulated Ryan and sent him a gift. In the letter accompanying the package, Franklin wrote, "Being much pleased with your activity and bravery, in distressing the enemy's trade, and beating their vessels of superior force by which you have done honor to the American flag, I beg you to accept my thankful acknowledgement together with the present of a night glass [binoculars] as a small mark of the esteem with which I have the honor to be, Sir, yours etc." At the same time, Franklin wrote to John Jay, the president of Congress, boasting about his star privateer's recent success. "We continue to insult the coasts of these lords of the ocean with our little cruisers. A small cutter, which was fitted out as a privateer at Dunkirk, called the *Black Prince*, has taken, ransomed, burnt, and destroyed above thirty sail of their vessels within these three months."

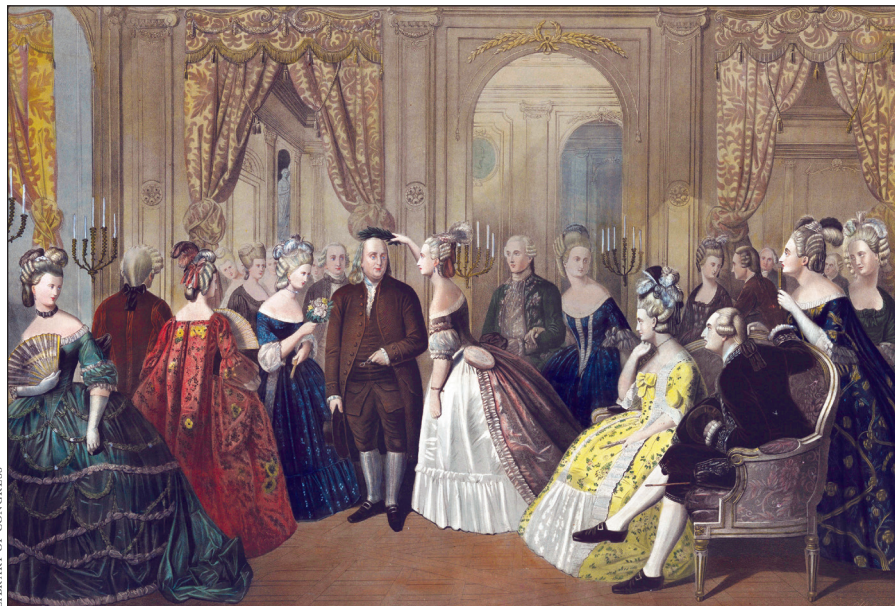
So happy was Franklin with the *Black Prince* that he commissioned a second privateer, the *Black Princess*, to be captained by Edward Macatter, Ryan's right-hand man and a fellow Irishman². The two privateers went on a joint cruise from December 1779 to March 1780 without Ryan, who had taken ill and was replaced by his

first lieutenant, Patrick Dowlin. It was another success. Twenty prizes were captured and sixty-eight prisoners brought in. According to a letter in the *London Courant*, "Complaints are very loud in the north part of this kingdom against the Admiralty for not protecting the coast from the depredations of 'the two American corsairs.'"

No sooner had the joint cruise ended than Franklin commissioned a third privateer, the *Fearnot*, commanded by Ryan, who had by then recuperated from his illness. The cutter had eighteen six-pounders, twenty swivel guns, and a crew of ninety-six. From March through the end of August, Franklin's "Irish" privateers conducted a total of six more cruises, capturing sixty prizes. Reflecting on the *Fearnot's* actions off the coast of Inverness, Scotland, one local resident wrote to the *London Chronicle* that "on the west coast the *Fearnot* American privateer, Luke Ryan commander, reigns uncontrolled. It is not many days since he took all the shipping belonging to the town of Stornoway... Scarce a day passes without his making a descent on some part of the coast."

The cruises were not a complete success, however. In April the *Black Prince* was chased by a frigate flying British colors. Thinking that the frigate might be French, Dowlin hoisted a French flag to signal that he was a friend, but still the frigate came on, forcing the *Black Prince* into very shallow water just a few hundred yards from land. Before the two vessels could engage, the *Black Prince* plowed into the rocks near Berck, France. All the men on the *Black Prince* made it to shore, but the cutter was a wreck. As for the frigate, moments after the crash, it sheared off, and its captain lowered the British flag and raised the *fleur-de-lis*, revealing its true identity: it was a French privateer, and its captain later claimed that he believed the *Black Prince* was a British ship that had raised the French flag as a ruse.

By September 1780, Franklin was done with privateering. French authorities had become annoyed with his cavalier manner in awarding commissions and adjudicating prizes; various controversies had arisen, among them a dispute over a neutral Dutch vessel improperly declared a prize. Furthermore, they were frustrated that so many Frenchmen had signed on to American



Franklin's Reception at Court of France, 1778 by Anton Hohenstein, c. 1860

Franklin was arguably the most famous American of the day, and certainly the most revered, not only for his scientific accomplishments and inventions but for his political and philosophical genius. It was his diplomatic skill, however, that proved the most important to the cause, playing a critical role in bringing the French into the war on the American side.

privateers instead of serving in the French navy. Vergennes, the foreign minister, told Franklin that while he couldn't force him to recall the privateering commissions given to the *Black Princess* and the *Fearnot*, he recommended that he do so for the sake of Franco-American relations. Franklin, who had long wanted to devote more time to diplomacy, gladly complied.

There was yet another reason Franklin was eager to turn away from privateering. He had not been as successful as he had hoped in achieving his overriding goal of transforming captured British sailors into free Americans. While his three privateers had brought back 161 prisoners in total, that was a disappointingly low number, given how many prizes they had taken. Furthermore, a significant number of those prisoners had elected to sign on as crew members on one of the privateers. But even if the privateers had delivered more men, Franklin might not have been able to use them. The British continued to balk at cartels, and only two other small exchanges had taken place while Franklin's privateers were active.

Still, Franklin had cause to be proud of what the *Black Prince*, the *Black Princess*, and the *Fearnot* had accomplished. As historian William Bell Clark concluded in his seminal book on Franklin's privateers, "Despite all Franklin's regrets, the accomplishments of his privateers he realized had been phenomenal." Combined, 114 "British vessels of all descriptions [had been] sent in, burned, scuttled, or ransomed... Better than that, however, had been the consternation of British shipowners, the soaring of marine insurance rates, the havoc to the coastal trade in the English, Irish, and Scotch seas, and the discomfiture of the British admiralty."

With their American commissions clawed back, the owners of the *Black Princess* and the *Fearnot* obtained French privateering commissions and continued to send forth their vessels, under new names, to attack British shipping. Luke Ryan's luck ran out in April 1781, as captain of the French privateer *Calonne*. On the evening of the fourteenth, the *Calonne* captured the Scottish brig *Nancy*, just south of the Firth of Forth in Scotland. A few hours later, one of Ryan's men spotted the lights of two vessels in the distance. The captain of the

Nancy, who was on board the *Calonne*, told Ryan that earlier that day he had seen two British whaleships heading north. Thinking that the two in the distance might be those vessels, Ryan set off after them.

As he got closer, he saw that the two ships were quite large and surmised that they were not whaleships, but merchantmen loaded with valuable goods. His confidence that he could take them easily was understandable. The *Calonne* was a 400-ton frigate with 34 cannons and nearly 250 men. Ryan ordered a broadside and yelled across the water for the larger ship to surrender. So confident was he that his demand would be met that he had a boarding party crowd into one of the *Calonne's* boats to prepare to claim the prize.

The "merchantman" suddenly sprang to life, as hundreds of marines were called to their battle stations. Ryan had chosen the wrong mark. This was no merchantman but rather the 74-gun third-rate ship of the line *Berwick*. Realizing the enormity of his mistake, Ryan fled so precipitously that he cut loose the boarding party, leaving them at the mercy of the British. Before the *Calonne* had gone too far, the *Berwick's* escort, the thirty-six-gun *Belle Poule*, caught up, and for forty-five minutes the two ships traded cannon shots, giving the *Berwick* enough time to enter the fray and force Ryan to surrender.

According to the *Edinburgh Advertiser*, after being brought into Edinburgh, Ryan boasted that he would have beaten the *Belle Poule* had not the *Berwick* come to its aid. He added that he had not allowed his colors "to be struck till he was knocked down by one of his own men, and then he attempted to get hold of a match to blow up the powder-room and his ship."

Ryan was put on trial for piracy. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. But many notable figures, including representatives of the French government, pleaded with British officials on his behalf. In March 1783, with the final peace negotiations nearing, he was given a royal pardon as a gesture of goodwill toward the French and the Americans.

Ryan died in 1789 in debtors' prison. His obituary in London's *Gentlemen's Magazine* mentioned his poverty but also his string of successes as a privateersman, claiming that the *Black Prince* under his

captaincy "captured more vessels belonging to Great Britain than any other single ship during the war," and that during his privateering career he "did more injury to the trade of these kingdoms than any other single commander ever did." †

NOTES

¹ Ransoming, in the privateering context, meant allowing a prize to depart after first obtaining a written promise from the captain of the vessel that the owner would pay a certain fee for the safe return of his vessel. In many instances the captain would be held captive to ensure that the ransom was paid. American privateers were not supposed to ransom prizes, per the privateering regulations they operated under, but they often did, which spared them the necessity of placing a prize crew on the vessel that would sail it into port.

² Franklin had, apparently, decided to disregard the stipulation that a privateer captain had to be American, and instead allowed Irishmen to fill that position.

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