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The Civil War Adventures of a Blockade Runner

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William Watson published his account of the two years he spent evading Union gunboats and dealing with the “sharpers” who fed off the misfortune of war in 1892. Using log books, personal papers, and business memoranda, he sought to write a “plain, blunt” account of “events just as they happened.” Instead, he wrote a classic adventure tale whose careful description of seafaring in the 1860s gives us a glimpse into a world now closed to us.

Watson is the protagonist, but he shares his story with his ship, the *Rob Roy*, a center-board schooner whose shallow draft and wide beam made it the ideal vessel for slipping over shoals and dashing in and out of blockaded ports. He peoples his account with the good, the bad, and the unlucky, from the likeable and irrepressible Captain Dave McLusky to the loathsome and dishonest Mr. R. M. He takes his reader from Havana, where land sharks greeted incoming sailors, to Galveston, where sharp businessmen and corrupt officials connived to confiscate both profits and ships. He stops at Matamora, a dusty place on “a bare and barren coast,” and he visits General Magruder in Houston. His crew brave gales and a hurricane that drives the *Rob Roy* back thirty miles; and he survives plots against his ship and his life.

Through it all, Watson enjoys himself. Blockade running, he declares, was not “unlawful or dishonourable.” Rather, it was “a bold and daring enterprise,” an “exciting sport of the higher order,” like racing yachts, and an almost obligatory act of defiance of a blockade “maintained by no other right than by the force of arms.” The “commission merchants” did better than the blockade runners. But Watson recalled his years dodging federal gunboats and outwitting petty officials, treacherous crew, and dishonest businessmen as “much more congenial than the extortions and deceitful wheedling and trickeries of the *legitimate* trade.”

This is an adventure story held together by the nuts and bolts of sailing. Watson’s discussion of why sail was superior to steam for running blockades is superb; his detailed accounts of surviving gales and outrunning Federal cruisers are fascinating. He takes yellow fever and high sea chases in stride. Through it all, he maintains his honor and guards his profits. For the reader who wants to ply the Gulf of Mexico under sail, play the lottery in Havana, and visit Texas when it was “a new country,” Watson is the perfect guide to run the blockade that time imposes on posterity.

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