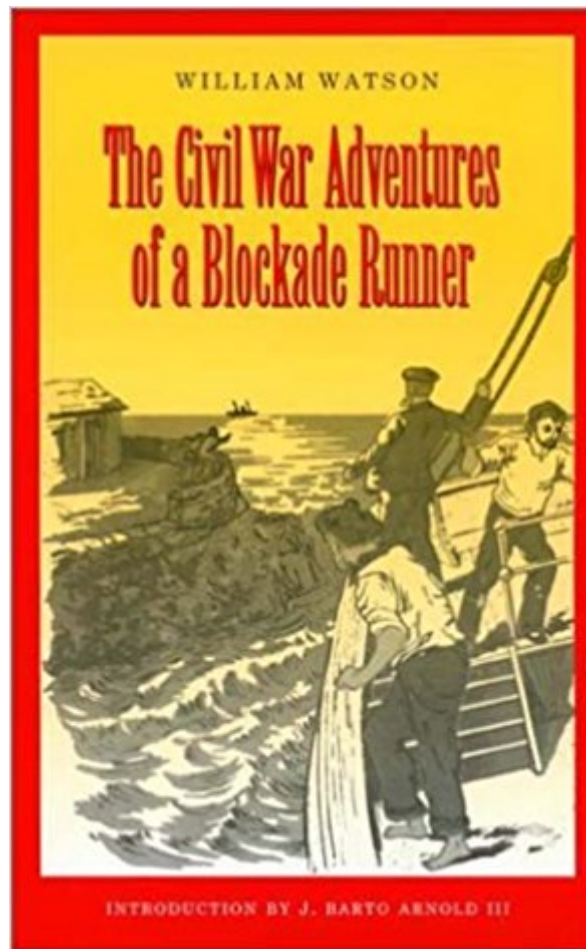




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The Civil War Adventures Of A Blockade Runner



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

"This is a great book with a lot of action that will make an excellent addition to your Confederate Navy bookshelf."--The Lone Star Book Review (The Lone Star Book Review 2013-01-16)

A British subject, William Watson lived and worked in the South prior to the outbreak of war in 1861. Although he opposed secession, he served with the Confederate army. Wounded at the battle of Corinth and subsequently declared unfit for further service, he found his way to New Orleans and blockade running. He recounted his service with the Confederacy in *Life in the Confederate Army*.

This is a true-life adventure story. The author does not attempt to tell a story of daring exploits - rather, he gives a factual accounting of his experiences as the owner-captain of a [private] Confederate blockade runner operating in the Gulf of Mexico during the US Civil War. However, this factual account is all the more captivating because it is real. What makes this story unique [for the genre] is that this is not a story about one of the big [fast] steam ships running the blockade in and out of the major ports on the Atlantic coast, this is a story about a relatively small, shallow draft sailing schooner using stealth and its ability to go into shallow waters to sneak past the Union ships in the backwaters of the Gulf. The other aspect of the story that really sticks out is that the vast majority of the true threats and dangers to both the captain and his little boat take place on land not at sea. From corrupt public officials and conniving business partners to dishonest and dangerous crew members you can't help but worry for the man every time he steps ashore. A great read. Thanks to Barto Arnold and Texas A&M University Press for re-publishing it.

This book tells a great story of doing business during a war. If you think government is out of control now, read what this poor guy went through trying to stay afloat with two governments going at it. The guy sells his business in New Orleans to buy a trading schooner. He learns that because of the war, trade has stopped, and so he turns to illegally trading through the blockade of the south. Criminals and shenanigans abound in this story and are augmented by the normal perils of going to sea in a wooden sailing ship. The guy is not a trained writer, but he's a natural story teller. It's amazing how vivid his writing is.

Superbly written, by a ship engineer and reluctant soldier.

I happened across the title, "The Civil War Adventures of a Blockade Runner," while doing some research on the Civil War in Texas. At the time, I was skeptical about what I might find in the book. As it turns out, Watson's book is not only a fast read, it's entertaining and suspenseful, too! In this book, William Watson relates the experiences he had during the last few years of the Civil War. Watson, a British subject and a Confederate veteran, purchases a schooner, the Rob Roy, with the intent of making money through honest trade. However, he quickly realizes that more money might be had through blockade running. To that end, while making a run up the Texas coast to New Orleans, he ducks into the Brazos River at peril from a blockading gunboat and begins his career as a runner. In his career, Watson makes several successful runs with the Rob Roy before he is forced to sell it because of disagreements with his business partners. Watson then finds employment on a steamer, and later captains a few more runs himself before the Civil War -- and with it, blockade running -- comes to an end. Several things interested me in the book. First, Watson paints a good picture of the Confederate economy. I could almost see him cringe when the government seizes his boat and desires to pay him off with worthless Confederate paper money. However, Watson manages to keep his cool and successfully negotiates to have his vessel released. Also, Watson goes into great details about the tricks he learns to avoid the United States gunships and slip in and out of Galveston. Finally, Watson's business transactions show that many people, including foreign governments, found ways to make money, if not a living, from the war. To be sure, Watson makes no apology for being an experienced sea captain. As a result, the reader will want to have handy a nautical dictionary to better understand what happened, for example, when the foreboom unshipped from its mast, or to understand what the captain of a boarding party is saying when he asks, "Is your jib to windard?" While the general idea can be had if the reader bears with Watson, I find it all the better to get the full nuance that he intended. I completed the book in a week, mainly because I

always wanted to find out what was going to happen to Watson next. Through good luck and bad, Watson makes the most of his career, with the result that he finds himself hundreds of dollars richer than when he began. If you are interested in either the operation of 19th Century sailing ships, or the United States blockade during the Civil War, I recommend that you read this book as an excellent eyewitness account of both.

First, I arranged for the re-publication of this book because it relates to the Institute of Nautical Archaeology's multi-year excavation of the wreck of the *Denbigh*, a famous blockade-runner lost at Galveston in 1865. Certainly, I am a biased reviewer. The book is of interest for the excellent writing style and coverage of the topic. Watson provides many technical details of how the captain of a blockade-runner carried out his job, including both daring the Union Navy and dealing with sharp businessmen ashore. We have no first hand accounts as yet for the *Denbigh*, but Watson's trips in and out of Galveston from Havana and other ports were very, very similar. Watson brings the past to life.

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