

High Seas and Yankee Gunboats:A Blockade-Running Adventure From the Diary of James Dickson

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Review

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Durham, Roger S. *High Seas and Yankee Gunboats:A Blockade-Running Adventure from the Diary of James Dickson.* University of South Carolina Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 1570035725

Savannah sailors aboard the *Standard*

Coastal Georgians relied on blockade runners' success

When Southerners James Dickson and Thomas Hernandez went to sea aboard a blockade runner in early 1862, they dreamed of patriotism and profits. They did not expect the hazards to be so great.

High Seas and Yankee Gunboats is author and historian Roger Durham's dramatic narrative of Civil War naval operations, of the Union blockade of the Georgia coast, and of one ship's efforts to thwart Yankee warships. Durham is the director of the U.S. Army Heritage Museum at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. This is his third book. He has edited two other Civil War histories, both journals written by Confederate soldiers.

Here, Durham uses the detailed four month journal of James Dickson as he tells of his adventures as a blockade runner aboard the British-flagged sailing vessel, *Standard*, sailing out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Georgia. Durham effectively uses extracts from Dickson's journal, adding his own vivid narrative to produce an exciting tale of high seas adventure, blended with descriptions of Union gunboat operations along Georgia's coast, and the worried plight of coastal Georgia residents, local militia, plantation owners, and black slaves.

As Durham relates, James Dickson and Thomas Hernandez were friends who saw great profits in the risky business of blockade running. Both men were from Savannah, Georgia, met in New York City, and illegally departed aboard ship for Halifax, hoping to join the crew of a blockade runner in Nova Scotia.

Dickson's journal and Durham's narrative provide a stunning story of North Atlantic winter storms, shipwreck, and miserable conditions aboard ship, with bad food, seasickness, wet, cold clothing, and fatigue from constant watch-standing. Aboard the brigantine, *Standard*, loaded with a valuable cargo of food, medicine, boots, dry goods, lead, and gun caps, Dickson and Hernandez endure 48 hellish days at sea, blown far off course by the fierce winter gales. Dickson writes: "Fearful weather and make no mistake. We all feel very anxious, however God can protect us here as on land." Later he writes: "What more appalling sight in the entire universe than an angry raging sea."

Although damaged by the storms, the *Standard* finally sights the Georgia coast and must somehow penetrate the Union blockade. The stormy weather was bad enough, but the ship must avoid the deadly presence of lurking Union gunboats.

Dickson tells how his ship luckily gets past the blockade screen, and how the crew manages to finally work the ship upstream on the narrow and shallow waters of the North Newport River, en route to the small port of Riceboro. Here, without explanation, his journal abruptly ends in mid-sentence, in mid-page.

Durham picks up the narrative and tells the remarkable story of the fate of the *Standard*, her cargo and crew, and of the bold efforts of Union gunboats to find the elusive blockade runner. He also tells a parallel storyline about the local residents, their struggles with a measles epidemic, joy at the arrival of the *Standard*, and then panic at the sudden presence of patrolling Yankee warships.

Dickson's journal entries make for compelling reading, filled with colorful detail of his sailing and blockade running adventures, but Durham's own narrative is equally good. He describes Union naval operations, especially the blockade effort along the Georgia coastline, highlighting the gunboats and their crews. Aggressive and resourceful Union naval officers like Lt. Commander Pendleton Gaines Watmough, Commander John R. Goldsborough, and Commander Alexander A. Semmes are showcased, finally receiving credit for their efforts in a war where much public and historical focus is on land campaigns while the war at sea is often overlooked or ignored.

This is a well-crafted history of little-known Civil War naval operations, supplemented with maps, photos, notes, and bibliography (no index). Dickson's journal offers a rich, personal perspective, made all the more interesting with

Durham's research and his own moving narrative. For more outstanding reading about Civil War naval operations, see *Raiders and Blockaders: The American Civil War Afloat* by William N. Still, Jr., John M. Taylor, and Norman C. Delaney (Brassey's 1998).

William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a professional book reviewer with more than 1100 reviews published, and is an instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the Maine coast.