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Two Years on the Alabama: A Firsthand Account of the Daring Exploits of the Infamous Confederate Raider

Arthur Sinclair
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The naval history of the American Civil War offers two emblematic battles. One is the famous clash of the ironclads Monitor and Virginia (better known as Merrimac) in Hampton Roads, which opened a new chapter in warship design; the other is the duel of the dashing Confederate raider Alabama against the Union sloop-of-war Kearsarge in the English Channel in June 1864, a contest that provides the climax of this unusual, colorful memoir of Alabama's two-year guerre de course against Union shipping from
the Caribbean to China seas.

First published in 1895, the author's account chronicles his service as an officer aboard Alabama from her commissioning as a Confederate warship until her destruction. It's an eventful tale vividly told, filled with chases, skirmishes, and narrow escapes as well as peaceful interludes like a sojourn in South Africa, whose British governor fêted their arrival with formal dinners and fancy-dress balls. And, of course, there's an exciting first-person account of the battle off Cherbourg that ended Alabama's fiery career.

In addition, readers get a glimpse of mid-nineteenth-century naval life and a fascinating primer on the rules of war at sea in an era far closer to John Paul Jones than to Bull Halsey. What Sinclair himself doesn't explain, publisher Simon Waterlow clarifies in an able introduction. Several maps and a sixteen-page insert of black-and-white photographs and engravings add a visual touch, and back matter includes crew rosters, brief biographies of principal characters, and more. It's not just a ripping yarn, in short; it's serious source material for Civil War buffs and naval historians.

It is also, however, very much a book of its age. Even when it was first published more than a century ago, some critics complained that Sinclair painted a romanticized portrait of "gallant Jack Tar" and glossed over harsher aspects. And—reader be warned—Sinclair's style is High Victorian, courtly and orotund, now and then outright florid: "He stands six foot two, and is of stalwart frame, lithe and straight as an Indian, with a fine head and a mild, benevolent dark-

blue eye that can flash lightning all the same on occasion. His phenomenal mustache and beard, of auburn color, give him the very presence of an ancient viking." Some may find the style a bit over the top, but others will think its charm adds greatly to the Old-South atmosphere, providing one of the narrative's greatest pleasures.

Both classic sea tale and important historical document, Two Years on the Alabama will appeal to both serious students and more casual readers.

Peyton Moss