

John Dynamite The Adventures of a Filibuster

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The pirate ship Alabama
(*Harper's Weekly*, 1 November 1862)

The seagulls hovered at sea level to catch the slippery fish. They executed elegant pirouettes and then, with their prey firmly grasped in their beaks, they rose upwards until the raw flesh was devoured. This scene was repeated over and over again. Once their appetites were satisfied, they went to rest on the masts of the numerous ships anchored at George Steer's shipyard.

Near the East River, in the house of the Irishman O'Brien, a new baby was born. It was 20 April 1837. The rough hands of the immigrant, a native of County Longford, Ireland, lifted the newborn into the air. Smiling, the mother watched her husband, one-time farmer turned machinist through necessity.

The boy crawled on the deck of the ships. There he took his first steps and he felt, from the very beginning, that his life would be tied to the sea. Near to his home were the shipyards of Steer, Webb, Brown, Collier, Mackey, Joyce and Roosevelt. The ships' boilers were constructed at Morgan and Novelty's foundry, located on the periphery of the shipyards.

School held little attraction for the young O'Brien. His teachers failed to motivate him, because his thoughts were always on the ships. Classes would barely be over when he went to the shipyards to work until nightfall without earning a cent. This passion brimmed over when his brother Peter, who owned a rowboat, took him to Greenpoint. The teenager learned quickly. He quickly mastered sailing on the small single-sailed boat. He managed to navigate through the difficult channel that separates the Long Island Sound and the East River. At thirteen years of age, his muscles began to develop beneath his sailor's shirt. He had a firm, dreamer's gaze, a broad nose, thick hair, protruding chin. His face appeared wild. His tough personality was already showing through. The sea was his best school and ships the best method of teaching.

It was in no way surprising that he should leave school and, without his father's permission, offer his services as a cook to Luke Russel, captain of the fishing boat *Albion*. In his memoirs, John wrote:

I couldn't even boil a pot of water without burning it, but I could catch a cod where nobody else could. Luke was happier with this ability than with the discovery he made about my inability to cook and I remained at his side all that winter until Peter found me and made me return home. [2]

His worried parents noted John's enduring sadness. Taciturn, he would spend long hours watching the movement of the ships. His heart was heavy. He wanted to return to his nautical wanderings and they had to let him have his way. He was stubborn, like a good Irishman, and he would not have his arm twisted. His destiny was to hold adventures, and long and dangerous voyages, and nobody, absolutely nobody could stop him from fulfilling it. Besides, no better career awaited a poor immigrants' son.

John's apprenticeship continued for a few more years; he alternated his studies to obtain the title of captain at Thom School, Cherry Street, with practical experience on the ship *Jane*. But the Civil War broke out and O'Brien introduced himself to the lawyer Edward N Dickinson of Far Rockway with the hope of joining his ship's crew. He was turned down on account of his young years.

The boy persisted and in the summer of 1862, on board the *Illinois*, he took part in a difficult voyage. On returning to New York he received his qualification.

Filibuster

The schooner *Deer* was to transport a cargo of goods to Matamoros, Mexico. John was employed as an officer. On the journey, they were hounded by bad weather and took refuge on the island of Nassau to repair the ship. There the captain lost his job due to ineptitude; one of the ship's owners appointed John to the vacant position and confided in him. Before continuing on the voyage he admitted that they were smuggling arms for the Confederates. The contraband was destined for Brownsville, Texas. From Matamoros the cargo would be transported via the Río Grande. O'Brien did not raise any objections about the new adventure. However, the North-American consul on the island found out about the *Deer's* plans and ordered the holds to be checked on the following day. Nevertheless the smugglers escaped, as they raised anchor very early in the morning. At the mouth of the port, a Federal cruiser passed beside them. They sailed faster, because they knew that if they were captured, the gallows awaited them.



The *Deer* 'was more than just a light ship: it flew. We kept a careful watch on prow and stern, both day and night', tells O'Brien, 'but we noticed nothing that looked like the enemy, the possibility of a chase across the Gulf was exciting; then I became infected with the seed of filibuster fever (...).' John was happy with the outcome of the journey. He had been paid a large sum of money and the *Deer's* owner, after selling the schooner and dispatching the cargo, gave him a further one hundred dollars for the trip to New York. He made the return trip aboard the schooner *Pride of the Waves*.

Under Marco Aurelio's Command

It was in 1887 that the *City of Mexico*, the crew of which was led by O'Brien, passed into the hands of Marco Aurelio Soto, former president of Honduras. Friends of the former head of state plotted for him to recoup this position. They organised an expedition that failed when the *City of Mexico* was captured in Jamaican waters by the British authorities.

Marco Aurelio's followers persevered with their plans and hired O'Brien at the head of the Norwegian steamship *Fram*. The Irishman sailed to Turks Island, to the north of Santo Domingo. There a contingent of expeditionaries was waiting, ready to invade Honduras. O'Brien fulfilled his duties with the men who had hired him and returned to New York. [3]

Captain Dynamite

John wandered aimlessly around the dock of Iron Babel, looking for some risky adventure that would release him from the routine of his life. This opportunity presented itself in the first days of summer 1888, when an affluent Cuban arrived in the city in need of a brave captain to transport sixty tonnes of dynamite to Panama.

The rumour in the taverns was that the dynamite would be used for a planned insurrection in Cuba. The Cuban already had a schooner, *The Rambler*, which he had purchased from Commodore Thomas, and which was the largest ship in the New York shipyard. Yet the days passed without him finding the daring captain who would take this dangerous cargo to the port of Colón. As soon as they found out what it was they would be transporting in the hold they refused.

'Don't waste your time, my friend, go see the Irishman O'Brien. He's the man you're looking for', he was told when he was already contemplating returning to the Isthmus empty-handed.



Gulf of Mexico at the border of Texas and Louisiana
(Morton Robert A. *Coastal Classification Atlas*)

On first impressions, he thought that they had been joking with him. The Irishman did not look like much. He was short and thin. He thought that this man could never be the protagonist of the extraordinary feats he had been told about. Nevertheless, he had no other candidate.

O'Brien accepted immediately, attracted more by the adventure than by the large sum he was offered. The dynamite was packed in cylindrical containers one inch in diameter and a foot long, protected by sawdust and placed in fifty-pound boxes.

While the schooner waited under the watchful eye of the Statue of Liberty, O'Brien lied in order to hire a crew. He told the sailors that they were going to Panama to collect the ship's owner, who owned a coal business. He also

told them that from there they would embark on a long voyage and that was why they were carrying plentiful provisions in the hold.

These were the first days of summer. In the Gulf of Mexico the waves gently beat against the schooner. The sky was clear. The evening fell early and the sailors who were not on watch soon gave in to slumber only to be awoken in the midst of thunder, lightning and heavy rain.

The gusts of wind threatened to carry off the sails with them. O'Brien ordered them to be lowered immediately. *The Rambler* galloped about like a rider on a wild horse. Some sailors prayed, while the captain only thought about the risk of an electrical charge falling on the boxes of dynamite - and boom.

At midnight the storm still had not diminished in intensity. The brusque movements of the boat could have caused an explosion. O'Brien slipped down to the hold to make sure that the boxes were in their places. His fears were not unfounded. Using some pieces of wood and canvas straps he managed to return them to order. The boat continued creaking as if, at a second's notice, it would shatter into pieces. It was a long night.

Finally the sun laid the last traces of the storm to rest. At full speed, the schooner sailed to Jamaica, where they took on ice. Then they continued on to Boca del Toro. There they handed over the vessel and each man went his separate way.

O'Brien waited for the boat that would take him to New York. Every day he walked along the narrow streets of the old port where there was little to admire. To make matters worse, cholera invaded the captain's body. As soon as he could get out of bed he left for the United States. There his colleagues in Hell Gate, in between jokes and deep gulps of whiskey, baptised him John Dynamite. That is how he became known during the war of 1895, during which he served Cuba's cause for independence against the Spanish. In this struggle he left a trail of heroic exploits in his wake, carving legends of bravery.

On his steamship *Bermudas* and on other vessels he transported valuable war supplies and rebel troops to the island. Among the illustrious passengers he carried was Calixto García, Lieutenant-General of the Liberation Army of Cuba. His adventures at sea, thwarting Spanish cannons, and throwing Spanish and Yankee spies off the scent in the United States, could be the plot of a novel. But that is another story and one that will be told in the next issue of this publication.



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Notes

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[2] A copy of John's memoirs is housed in the Sala Cubana of Cuba's José Martí National Library. The translator's name does not appear.

[3] Herminio Portell Vilá, 'John O'Brien Dinamita, el Capitán Dinamita' in *Vidas de la unidad americana, 25 biografías de americanos ilustres*, Editorial Minerva, Havana (1944), 358.