

The First Bermuda Race

By John Rousmaniere

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The oldest regularly scheduled ocean race began over 100 years ago with the then radical idea of amateur sailors' racing normal boats in the ocean. The Bermuda Race was the brainchild of Thomas Fleming Day, editor of America's most influential boating magazine, *The Rudder*.



© Mystic Seaport Collection #1996.96.609 Thomas Fleming Day

Day was a prophet of the troublemaking, noisy variety. His favorite target was anybody who claimed that the sea was inherently unsafe. "The danger of the sea for generations has been preached by the ignorant," he shouted. The problem wasn't with the sea, and it wasn't with the average sailor. No, the problem was with the blue-blazer crowd in the yacht clubs. He railed against the "crowd of weaklings and degenerates," those "gray-headed, rum-soaked piazza yachtsmen," those "men who had never been to sea except in the Coney Island boat, and then probably were seasick."

What, Day demanded, "do these miserable old hulks, who spend their days swigging booze on the front steps of a clubhouse, know about the danger of the deep?" "What does the average yachtsman know about sea sailing? Absolutely nothing! Then let him hold his tongue."

Pretty wild stuff. Day calmed down a little when the subject turned to why people should want to go to sea in the first place. Amateur seafaring, he said, is a healthy thing to do. More than healthy: seafaring improves character. "A noble art makes noble men," Day insisted, "and there is no nobler art than seamanship." And besides better people, a long ocean race would develop better boats. Besides that, the race would be an escape from the dullness of shore life. "Sailors," he said, "wanted to get a smell of the sea and forget for the time being that there is such a thing as God's green earth in the universe."

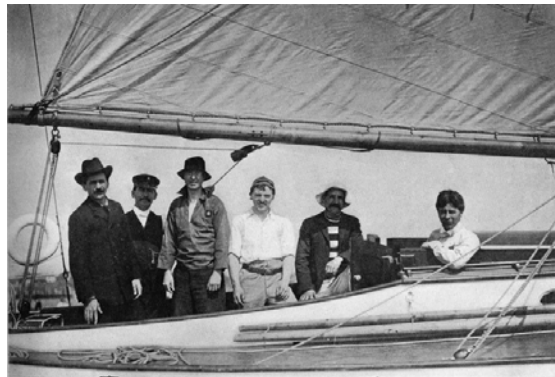
So in 1906 Tom Day ran a race to Bermuda. He arranged with the Brooklyn Yacht Club to start it in lower New York Bay, and the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club (RBYC) to finish it off St. David's Light – and manage the post-race festivities. The RBYC has been associated with the race throughout its history and since 1926 has co-sponsored it with the Cruising Club of America.



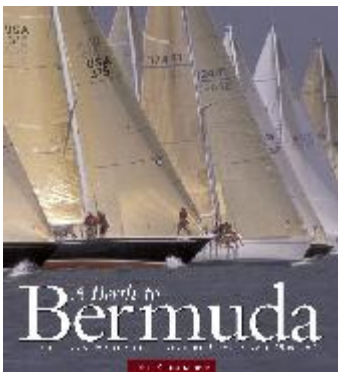
For a trophy, Thomas Fleming Day prevailed on Sir Thomas Lipton, the Scots-Irish tea baron and America's Cup challenger, to present an ornate cup. Today, the winners' trophies are representations of the island's two lighthouses at St. David's Head and Gibbs Hill.

Meanwhile furrow-browed critics were predicting disaster. It was rumored that funeral wreaths were delivered to the little fleet so the sailors would be prepared to make a decent burial at sea. The smallest entry in Bermuda Race history was in Tom Day's inaugural race in 1906. She was notorious not for her size, but for her crew, which included the owner's 20-year-old wife, Thora Lund Robinson.

Nobody, including Tom Day, had believed that a woman would dare to race, but here she was. A reporter described her as "a very slender young woman, with tawny hair and level gaze." Thora Lund Robinson's level gaze caught Tom Day between the proverbial devil and the deep blue sea, for to bar her would undermine his guiding principle that the sea was potentially safe for everyone. So when the small fleet of small boats banged out of lower New York Harbor on the end of the ebb tide, into a fresh head wind, among the spray-soaked sailors in *Gauntlet's* cockpit was Thora Lund Robinson. Today, she would not be noticed among the 200 or 300 women sailors in a typical Bermuda Race.



After heaving-to for two days in a Gulf Stream gale, little *Gauntlet* crossed the finish line with Thora Robinson at her helm, waving an American flag. Another boat dropped out, and the winner was the 38-foot yawl *Tamerlane*, with Thomas Fleming Day himself as sailing master.



A Berth to Bermuda: 100 Years of the World's Classic Ocean Race by John Rousmaniere (Mystic Seaport: Cruising Club of America / Mystic Seaport, 2006) is available from [Mystic Seaport](http://www.mysticseaport.com).