

stay awake, to make their physically taxing work more endurable, and to pace the strokes of their canoe paddles, other myths are not so easily dispelled. These frontier “proletarians” rarely saved their earnings or showed much interest in upward mobility; they played tricks on one another and deserved their reputation as heavy drinkers; and their frequent sexual contacts with Indian women only sometimes led to a kind of “marriage,” and that for but a short time. The author succeeds in demonstrating the voyageurs’ varied skills and physical endurance, but explanations more convincing than masculinity theory are still needed if readers are to understand the strong, strange fascination that lured them into the most

inaccessible regions of the continent with the harshest climate and greatest dangers.

Readers who want an author to demonstrate authority in providing definitive conclusions may find this book a frustrating journey—too much paddling without reaching a destination.

J. FREDERICK FAUSZ, associate professor of history, University of Missouri-St. Louis, has published on the fur trades in seventeenth-century Chesapeake Bay and in eighteenth-century Missouri. He was the organizer and program chair of the 2006 North American Fur Trade Conference held in St. Louis.



1812

War with America

By Jon Latimer

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 637. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

For almost two centuries, American historians have striven to invest the War of 1812 with enough significance to lift it out of the general obscurity in which it languishes. In the process, they tend to interpret the conflict as a consolidation of national independence, a follow-up to the War for Independence, and an opportunity for Americans to prove that their new republic was here to stay. Surely this is the most common theme in the stories that Americans told themselves

about the War of 1812. The best-known tales relate the victories of Oliver Hazard Perry’s hastily constructed flotilla on Lake Erie in September 1813 and Andrew Jackson’s improvised defense of New Orleans in January 1815. This celebratory interpretation has always been problematic, however. It requires turning the ineptitude of the American government, as well as a string of military disasters that climaxed in the burning of the indifferently defended

national capital in the late summer of 1814, into evidence of the enduring power of a democratic spirit that resides more in the will of its people than in its political institutions. Americans have worked hard to include the War of 1812 in a national narrative about the progress of American freedom. Now comes the experienced military historian Jon Latimer to suggest that in so doing scholars and the general public have missed the conflict's true significance.

Latimer writes from an avowedly British perspective. If his Americans sometimes seem like one-dimensional stock characters, well, turnabout is fair play. Latimer brilliantly locates the War of 1812 within the Napoleonic Wars of the era. Some historians have gestured at this global perspective; Latimer makes the most of it. In *1812: War with America*, the British are professionals confronting difficult challenges created by the huge expanse of the North American theater and the necessity of playing second fiddle to events on the other side of the Atlantic. Latimer does not shy away from criticizing the decisions of British officers on the ground in North America, including the dubious (and ultimately fatal) choices of Major-General Sir Edward Pakenham in the lead-up to the Battle of New Orleans. Nevertheless, *1812* offers an important corrective to the usual American perspective on the enemies of the republic. Even when Latimer is blatantly partisan—in describing the burning of Wash-

ington as a just response to the destructive behavior of American forces, he cannot resist saying that the immediate impact was to create “among the unfortunate inhabitants a feeling of shock and awe” (p. 318)—his judgments are smart and sound.

Latimer's greatest achievement lies in making a plausible case for counting the War of 1812 as a victory for the British, who thwarted the major initial American objective: the conquest of Canada. According to Latimer, the origins of the war lay in American belligerence, while its most important outcome was the survival—not of the United States—but of Canada. Canadians find it easier to commemorate the war because they can celebrate it as a spirited and ultimately successful fight against American aggression.

Historiography aside, most readers will simply enjoy reading *1812: War with America*. Latimer writes with confidence and flair. He is particularly adept at breathing life into his characters and at organizing the details of so many separate actions into a coherent whole. The result is a lively book that is by far the most compelling account of the War of 1812 I have ever read.

ANDREW CAYTON, Distinguished Professor of History at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, is co-author with Fred Anderson of *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (2005).