



2011-012

Jeremy Black. *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2009. Pp. xv, 286. ISBN 978-0-8061-4078-0.

Review by John C. Fredriksen, Smithfield, RI (jfredriksen@sisna.com).

Even a cursory review of English scholarship on the War of 1812 reveals a—till recently—relative lack of interest among military writers from the British Isles. Reginald Horsman proffered the first English perspectives on the War of 1812's causation and course in the 1960s.¹ By the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, Robin Reilly,² Anthony Pitch,³ and Jon Latimer⁴ added valuable battle and campaign studies. Jeremy Black's welcome new addition to this literature promises to alter how the War of 1812 is viewed in the context of its time. As the bicentennial of the war fast approaches, books of this sort represent the first salvo of revisionist studies invariably accompanying such events.

Black (Univ. of Exeter), a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of America and the West at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, is the prolific author of over ninety books, chiefly on military and eighteenth-century British history; he has written two prior books on US military history, each with its own unique, revisionist take on long-accepted events. In his latest effort, he eschews exacting military detail and provides a broad overview of the War of 1812 in all its facets. He ponders not only the usual tactical and strategic variables, but also economic, diplomatic, ethnological, geographical, and ideological avenues of inquiry. From a methodological standpoint, "this entails an excessive focus on [the] international context to the early republican period of American history, at the expense, in particular, of the role of domestic political debate in not only framing but also determining the understanding of this context, and therefore in providing the essential narrative. Yet, this international context is a necessary perspective, and, moreover, it is one that is generally underplayed in the standard accounts of the War of 1812—a conflict that, in fact, was very much set within a wider context of international conflict" (5). Thus Black adopts a truly "Atlantic vantage point" (xiv) to explain how and why events played out as they did (given the very unique relationship between the belligerents), their course, and consequences. This is the first study of the War of 1812 to cast so large a net, chronologically and geographically speaking, and it provides an original and cogent synthesis of matters often glossed over in more traditional studies.

Filling a very broad canvass, Black dissects the War of 1812 as a part of the ongoing Napoleonic conflagration, which the British could afford to regard as a serious, if annoying, sideshow consuming fiscal and military resources better spent closer to home. The war assumed more significant dimensions in the United States, which fought to counter Britain's high-handed maritime policies and unmistakably sneering condescension toward its former colony. The first chapter artfully investigates long-standing ties between the two contestants since 1775 and how a seemingly unnecessary conflict proved all but inevitable.

Chapter 2 examines the state of American preparations to attack, the ideological baggage of standing military establishments, and the inordinate difficulties England encountered defending Canada. Here, as in the rest of the book, Black adduces earlier efforts to conquer Canada, including the successful British attempt in 1763, and the spectacular American failure of 1775, to underscore the intractable problems this task posed. The roles of logistics, topography, native Americans, and local politics are all dissected, in turn, to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. Moreover, Black constantly invokes European affairs—Napoleon's invasion of Russia, Wellington's uneven but ultimately successful war in Spain, and Brit-

1. *The Causes of the War of 1812* (Philadelphia: U Penn Pr, 1962) and *The War of 1812* (NY: Knopf, 1969).

2. *The British at the Gates: The New Orleans Campaign in the War of 1812* (NY: Putnam, 1974).

3. *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 1998).

4. *1812: War with America* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2007) and *Niagara 1814: The Final Invasion* (Oxford: Osprey, 2009).

ish military and diplomatic policies towards the United States in light of shifts in the balance of power. He concludes that, despite some spectacular combat, neither could decisively defeat the other because “the far-flung nature of the War of 1812 insured that there was no major concentration of this force” (165).

The five remaining chapters succinctly treat continued fighting in Canada and the South, the war at sea, the British counterattack, postwar consequences, and historical conclusions. Turning to naval affairs in 1812–15, Black rightly gives the US Navy high marks for its professional preparations and the good showing it made in several celebrated ship-to-ship encounters. But the American fleet was too puny to shape the outcome of events at sea. The Royal Navy, by comparison, endured its share of embarrassing reverses, but these pinpricks did nothing to halt its gradual strangulation of America’s economy by blockade, the shipment of reinforcements to Canada and elsewhere, and its strategic initiative of outstanding amphibious capacity. Black is highly critical of Adm. Alexander Cochrane’s stodgy leadership and astutely claims that British maritime assets might have inflicted far more damage had they been commanded by his controversial nephew, Sir Thomas Cochrane! In many respects, the Royal Navy played the same role it had during the Revolutionary War, with similar success. The author also highlights genuine British concern about the French fleet of both wars, and cites various Caribbean actions to underscore naval tactics, capabilities, and limitations throughout this period.

Another essential but overlooked feature of the War of 1812 has been the conflict’s effects on British domestic politics. “The War of 1812 indeed occurred when Britain was already very war weary” (215). The general military and economic exhaustion occasioned by the struggle against Napoleon persisted after his abdication; despite punitive measures advocated by Lord Bathurst, the British government and people were eager for peace. American defensive victories at Baltimore and Lake Champlain coupled with a lack of British control of the Great Lakes led the Duke of Wellington himself to reject any notion of seizing land in North America or creating a chimerical Indian buffer state, especially given the potentially explosive situation engendered by the Congress of Vienna. Although the Americans were in no position, despite some artful dodging at Ghent, to demand a return to the status quo ante bellum, British diplomats conceded that point to concentrate on greater priorities closer to home. Black maintains that, even had the New Orleans expedition succeeded, the British government had no intention of violating the Treaty of Ghent and wished to avoid the problems an occupation might pose. Thus, apparent capitulation to the American upstarts in fact signaled a British desire for rapprochement in the postwar period, especially as it related to an emerging player, Canada. Despite some close calls up through the 1850s, arbitration finally supplanted war as the preferred method of settling Anglo-American disputes. “It was fortunate that, therefore, *revanche* played little role in the lexicon of either power. This was important to the development of the nineteenth-century world and to the eventual transition from British to American power” (243).

Black has consulted the most recent secondary literature as well as some rare and previously unknown primary sources in the National Army Museum to underscore British operational difficulties in the New World that differed little from those of 1775–83. His writing is crisp, engaging, and to the point, clarifying complex situations for those unfamiliar with the nuances of high-stakes international diplomacy and politics.

Scholars and lay readers alike can be grateful to Professor Black for showing that the War of 1812, far from being a mere frontier conflict of little import, actually had significant, far-reaching, and largely salutary implications for international diplomatic and military maneuvering at the time.

The possibility of European power projection ensured that America had to act within the international system. In part, the very rhetoric of standing outside this system and being different to the other powers was an expression of American aspirations to do so and of anger about not being able to fulfill them, rather than being a description of America’s true circumstances.... Alongside these consequences in terms of American failure, in the shape of the repeated inability to end the British presence in Canada or to force Britain to accept the American interpretation of its maritime rights, there were important successes, not least the rupturing of Anglo-American cooperation, the marked weakening of Native American opposition, and the blocking or defeat of British attacks (237).

A judicious blending of first-rate scholarship and incisive historical narration is likely to make *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon* a standard treatise on its subject, especially valued for elucidating high-level British perspectives on a long-overlooked facet of the conflicts of the Napoleonic era.