



The Battle of Lake Champlain: A “Brilliant and Extraordinary Victory”

by John H. Schroeder.

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Americans remember very little of the War of 1812, which is just as well, given the generally miserable performance of the US forces. Most know only that Andrew Jackson won a glorious victory at New Orleans in early 1815. A teacher probably told them that the war was already over by then, since the Treaty of Ghent had been signed by negotiators on 24 December 1814. As historian John Schroeder (Univ. of Wisconsin–Milwaukee)¹ points out in this slim volume, Jackson’s victory played no role in the peace deliberations; it was instead the “brilliant and extraordinary” naval action on Lake Champlain that empowered American negotiators to demand favorable terms from the British.

Schroeder has written a perceptive military history of a campaign, focusing on Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough of the US Navy. He also carefully establishes the political background of the battle on Lake Champlain and then persuasively assesses its impact on the negotiations at Ghent. He has done this in a masterfully succinct prose style that will appeal to both interested general readers and serious history students alike.

Schroeder begins with a preface laying out the significance of a battle that, he argues, historians have wrongly downplayed. He goes on to explain how a small American naval force under an untested commander defeated a British fleet, with decisive political and diplomatic consequences. In August 1814, the British raided Washington and captured eastern Maine a few days later. They then launched unsuccessful attacks on Baltimore and upstate New York in September.

Chapter 1, “The Indecisive Northern Theater, 1812 and 1813,” describes Henry Dearborn’s feeble efforts to invade Canada from the Lake Champlain region in late 1812, noting that James Wilkinson and Wade Hampton did no better in trying to take Montreal a year later. Schroeder concludes that “By the end of 1813, the United States had wasted two campaign seasons attempting to invade Canada. A combination of poor preparation, bad planning, largely incompetent civilian and military leadership, and poorly trained troops produced repeated failures” (21). Moreover, at this point, the British were winding up their war against Napoleon and sending reinforcements to invade American soil. *The Times* of London proclaimed that it was time to “give Jonathan² a good drubbing” (21–22).

Subsequent chapters provide lively and detailed campaign histories. Schroeder, a fine military historian, gives solid information without overwhelming the reader with details. Chapter 2, “The Champlain Valley in the War of 1812,” sketches the area’s strategic significance in the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolution; more importantly, it introduces us to Thomas Macdonough, a twenty-eight-year-old naval officer who took command of the small American flotilla on the lake. Schroeder spells out the advantages and disadvantages of each side in a region that remained a back-

1. His earlier work includes *Matthew Calbraith Perry: Antebellum Sailor and Diplomat* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2001) and *Commodore John Rodgers: Paragon of the Early American Navy* (Gainesville: U Pr of Florida, 2006).

2. On this name as a British (and eventually American) designation of New England or the United States, see *Wikipedia*, s.v., “Brother Jonathan.”

water, as the James Madison administration focused on the Niagara frontier and Lake Ontario. Nonetheless, in 1813–14, Macdonough built up a small squadron based at Vergennes, New York, while the British assembled their own fleet at Isle-au-Noix.

Chapter 3, “The British Occupation of Plattsburgh,” moves along to summer 1814, with a summary of British attacks in the Chesapeake region, the growing Federalist opposition to the war, and the British build-up in Canada. Gen. George Prevost, governor-in-chief of British North America, is the key individual here. An able administrator but mediocre commander, he decided to invade the United States via the Champlain Valley rather than Niagara or Detroit. Schroeder calls this plan “direct and cautious” (52) and observes that it simplified British supply lines. Furthermore, Prevost was supported by veteran troops recently arrived from Europe and three very capable and aggressive generals to lead them. The Americans knew of his plans, but most of their troops in the region were withdrawn to western New York in August. Fortune seemed to favor the British, and “the invaders were about to score a clear victory. The Americans would prove no match for British veterans in Plattsburgh or the British naval force on Lake Champlain” (65).

In chapter 4, “The Battle of Lake Champlain, September 11, 1814,” Schroeder demonstrates his expertise as a naval historian, evaluating in detail the relative strengths of each fleet’s ships, crews, and commanders. He finds that the British held an edge in every regard, especially in the combat experience of their officers. But General Prevost unwisely pressured the British commander to go into battle against a well prepared American fleet, when British land forces had not coordinated their landward attack as promised. Facing an unfavorable wind, the British struggled to come to grips with the Americans and, in the ensuing fierce battle, their commander was killed, as things went from bad to worse. The crucial moment came when Macdonough executed a “winding maneuver” to turn his anchored flagship around and deliver a withering broadside to the enemy. Schroeder credits his planning and leadership for this decisive naval victory. The cautious Prevost, seeing his lakeside flank now exposed, beat a hasty retreat to Canada, much to the disgust of his more determined subordinate generals.

The author now transitions from military aspects of the campaign to its political and diplomatic ramifications. Chapter 5, “Repercussions: Canada and the United States,” concerns the domestic aspects of victory. As Schroeder puts it, President Madison badly needed a victory to present to Congress, which was reconvening after the British had burned the Capitol. Macdonough’s welcome news bolstered support for the Madison administration and defused political opposition among secession-minded New Englanders.

Chapter 6, “Repercussions: London and Ghent,” elucidates the delicate peace negotiations, where the British had every reason to think they had the upper hand. Schroeder follows other historians in declaring the British three-man delegation “individually and collectively inferior to the Americans in terms of its diplomatic experience and ability to negotiate” (113). The Americans rightly feared that the British would demand territorial concessions in return for peace, but the news of British defeats at Baltimore and Plattsburgh began a turnaround, accelerated by the Duke of Wellington’s views on the war and a deteriorating situation in continental Europe. The author stresses the significance of a letter in which Francis Bayard, one of the American negotiators, proclaimed that “Nothing can be more brilliant than the victory of Macdonough on Lake Champlain nor anything more decisive in its effect” (126).

In his conclusion, Schroeder reiterates the strategic and political effects of the naval battle in moderating the British government’s demands. As word of the favorable outcome at Ghent came on the heels of reports of Jackson’s victory at New Orleans, the “convergence of the two events created the public illusion that the United States had won the war” (133).

John Schroeder has cast new light on the battle of Lake Champlain, refuting other secondary sources in his literature review while opening a fresh perspective by deploying the results of his original research in the primary sources. All this without indulging in extraneous details or cumbersome footnotes. In a delightfully direct and concise manner, he has blended political, diplomatic, and military history in a single book. A wide readership will learn much from this discerning operational and diplomatic study of the War of 1812.