



The Man Who Captured Washington: Major General Robert Ross and the War of 1812 by John McCavitt and Christopher T. George.

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Review by Mark Klobas, Scottsdale Community College (mark.klobas@scottsdalecc.edu).

On 24 August 1814, British soldiers commanded by Maj. Gen. Robert Ross occupied the capital of the United States of America, then a scattering of private homes and recently constructed federal buildings abandoned by Pres. James Madison after the Americans' defeat at the Battle of Bladensburg earlier that day. That night Madison could see from his vantage point across the Potomac the red glow of the fires started by the British soldiers, as they systematically burned the edifices housing the young government. When news of the achievement reached London, it burst into celebration and plans were made to triple Ross's forces for further operations against the former colony. But all the toasts and plans were for a man killed two weeks earlier by a militiaman's bullet.

Though Ross was mourned widely in the United Kingdom, his accomplishments and death were soon overshadowed by the drama of the Hundred Days and the battle of Waterloo. As historians John McCavitt and Christopher George put it in *The Man Who Captured Washington*, Ross simply "disappeared into a historical void" (208). Memorials to the man can be found today in both St. Paul's Cathedral and his hometown of Rostrevor in Northern Ireland; his American campaign has been the subject of numerous books,¹ but McCavitt and George have written the first proper biography of Robert Ross.

His campaign in the Chesapeake region was the culmination of Ross's lifetime career in the British military. The son of an Irish colonel who served in the Seven Years War, he joined the British army as an ensign in 1789. After a decade of uneventful service in Canada and England, he transferred to the 20th Regiment in 1799 and saw action in the Netherlands and Egypt. After fighting in Italy at the battle of Maida (4 July 1806), Ross's regiment joined the Walcheren expedition before it was transferred to Spain in 1812, where he distinguished himself as a brigade commander under Arthur Wellesley—the future Duke of Wellington—and was severely wounded at the Battle of Orthez (27 Feb. 1814). McCavitt and George argue that Ross's Peninsular service was a key influence on his subsequent campaign in America. But their discussion of it is far too brief; notably, they devote just two chapters to Ross's life before his appointment to command the expeditionary force.

The authors' wanting coverage of the first forty-six years of Ross's life is in stark contrast to their account of the campaign that took up the last seven months of his life. The offer to lead the expedition came as a surprise to Ross, who was still recovering from his near-fatal wound. Though generals had the option to decline invitations to serve, Ross accepted out of a sense of duty. Arriving in Bermuda in advance of his forces, he found himself amid preparations for a campaign of

1. E.g., Walter Lord, *The Dawn's Early Light* (NY: Norton, 1972), Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2000), and Peter Snow, *When Britain Burned the White House: The 1814 Invasion of Washington* (NY: St. Martin's, 2013).

vengeance: Sir Alexander Cochrane, the admiral commanding the Royal Navy's North American Station, aimed to avenge the Americans' destruction of York and other Canadian towns. Given its importance and vulnerability, Washington was an obvious target.

The authors stress that Ross did not share Cochrane's fixation on attacking the American capital. Even after his force of 4,500 men landed in southern Maryland (18 Aug. 1814), he had the prerogative as commander of the ground forces to choose another target if the odds of a successful attack on Washington looked poor. McCavitt and George depict Ross as a pragmatic, experienced commander able to make sensible judgments. In this case, given the poor state of the Americans' defenses and their tactical errors, Ross concluded that the odds of success were good. His judgment was borne out by the victory at Bladensburg, where British professionalism carried the day over the Americans' mix of marines, sailors, and militia. The way to Washington was clear.

With the city now at his mercy, Ross expected its leaders to capitulate and pay a ransom, as the nearby town of Alexandria had a few days earlier. Their failure to do this left Ross little choice but to carry out his orders to destroy the capital, which, the authors stress, he did without enthusiasm:

In the main, Ross's conduct was reserved, even subdued, during his time in Washington.... Never once did [Dr. James Ewell, a local physician] hear the British commanding officer utter an offensive remark about the president or the U.S. government "but often expressed the deepest regret that war had taken place between two nations so nearly allied in consanguinity and interest. I can, moreover, truly say I never saw the sunbeam of one cheerful smile on General Ross all the time he was in Washington. His countenance seemed constantly shrouded in the close shades of a thoughtful mind." The general's melancholy mood has often been explained as proceeding from his abhorrence at implementing orders he found distasteful. And there can be no doubt that the British commander abided by them with very considerable reluctance. (152)

Unlike Ross, his naval counterpart, the vengeful Adm. George Cockburn, notoriously delighted in torching Washington. For his part, Ross "only followed his orders to the minimum, ... absolutely refusing to burn private property, with the exception of the premises used to attack him and his men" (165). This restraint may explain Ross's lack of biographers—the vindictive Cockburn has suffered from no such neglect.²

The authors conclude by contending that Ross was the most capable of Wellington's generals. That appraisal unfortunately underscores the need for fuller assessments of Ross's service in the Peninsula in light of the conduct of his campaign in the Chesapeake. In short, much still remains to be learned about this capable and humane commander. In the meanwhile, John McCavitt and Christopher George's fine book goes far to restore Robert Ross to his proper place in British military history.

2. See, e.g., James Pack, *The Man Who Burned the White House: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1987), and Roger Morriss, *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn 1772–1853* (Columbia: U South Carolina Pr, 1998).