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“AND THE ROCKETS’ RED GLARE”—BRITAIN’S CHESAPEAKE CAMPAIGN IN 1814

Steve Vogel, *Through the Perilous Fight: Six Weeks That Saved the Nation*. New York: Random House, 2013. Pp. xviii, 534. ISBN 978-1-4000-6913-2.

Peter Snow, *When Britain Burned the White House: The 1814 Invasion of Washington*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014. Pp. x, 308. ISBN 978-1-250-04828-8.

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The War of 1812 may be a “forgotten conflict,” but most Americans know at least something about its highlights (and lowlights). Best known is probably the Battle of New Orleans. The lopsided US victory was certainly a shining moment for the young republic, but it is remembered today mainly because singer Johnny Horton turned an old Jimmy Driftwood fiddle tune into Billboard’s top song in 1959. It has been covered by a dozen other artists and still gets some radio air time. Many people also know about the burning of Washington and the “The Star-Spangled Banner,” written after the successful defense of Fort McHenry, which spared Baltimore from Washington’s fate or worse. The attacks on the two cities, which culminated Britain’s Chesapeake Campaign in 1814, make for a compelling story of an American disaster followed by redemption. Two recent books, one by an American, the other by a Briton, continue a long line of distinguished work on the War of 1812.

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In the nineteenth century, most Americans learned about the Chesapeake Campaign from general works, especially Benson J. Lossing’s *Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812*¹ and Henry Adams’s *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*.² Each of these contains about fifty pages on the campaign.³

Lossing had written an earlier, popular travelogue and sketchbook on the American Revolution.⁴ Hoping to duplicate its success, he traveled some ten thousand miles in the 1850s and 1860s to talk to people and view sites connected to the War of 1812. The resulting thousand-page tome features hundreds of sketches of nearly every significant person and battlefield of the war.⁵ The book sold well in its day and is still consulted today, but Henry Adams’s *History* has had a more lasting influence, especially among scholars. Based on careful research in archives on both sides of the Atlantic, Adams’s work contains arguably the first modern history of the War of 1812. Although the study gives the impression of an evenhanded account, Adams was a confirmed pessimist, who took a dim view of human nature. His account is also colored by a determination to disparage anyone who had opposed his ancestors John Adams and John Quincy Adams.⁶

Lossing writes favorably of the military leaders on both sides, even the hapless Brig. Gen. William Winder, who was charged with defending Washington, but argues that the civilian leaders—James Madison, Secretary of State James Monroe, and Secretary of War John Armstrong—should have left the defense

1. New York, 1868.

2. In nine volumes (New York, 1889–91). The authoritative two-volume Library of America (LOA) version (New York, 1986), ed. Earl N. Harbert, is based on Adams’s slightly revised version of 1901–4; it corrects typographical errors that appeared in that edition.

3. Adams, *History* (orig. ed.) 8:120–73, LOA 2:993–1032. Lossing, *Pictorial Field-Book*, 916–65.

4. *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1851–52).

5. Lossing also produced a three-volume *Pictorial Field Book of the Civil War* (New York, 1868–69).

6. See further Peter Shaw, “The War of 1812 Could Not Take Place: Henry Adams’s History,” *Yale Review* 62 (1973) 544–56, and “Blood Is Thicker Than Irony: Henry Adams’ History,” *New England Quarterly* 40 (1967) 163–87.

of the city to the military men. Adams, on the other hand, has little praise for anyone, military or civilian, on either side. Moreover, he does not even mention the writing of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which normally forms the glorious climax of American narratives of the campaign.

Adams’s *History* dominated the historiography of the War of 1812 for nearly a century, but his treatment of the Chesapeake Campaign was challenged in the first half of the twentieth century by William M. Marine⁷ and Neil H. Swanson.⁸ In addition, Irving Brant, in the last volume of his life-and-times biography of Madison⁹ presented a detailed and very sympathetic treatment of his subject’s role during the campaign, while sharply criticizing Armstrong, Winder, and the British commanders.¹⁰

The historiography of the campaign reached a new level in 1972 with the publication of Walter Lord’s *The Dawn’s Early Light*.¹¹ Making good use of primary and secondary sources on both sides of the Atlantic, Lord presented a detailed account of the campaign, replete with colorful quotations that are still familiar today because later scholars have so often repeated them. His well written, richly textured, evenhanded narrative is enhanced by a fine set of maps, but his footnotes are confusing and sometimes make it hard to precisely identify his sources. Lord’s immensely popular book (over a million copies sold) remains more than forty years later the standard against which all other books on the campaign may be fairly measured.

Several works on the campaign published near the end of the twentieth century¹² offer some new material, as do biographies of the leading characters, most notably Adm. Sir George Cockburn.¹³ This literature has also cemented the reputations of the leading characters in the story. On the American side, the heroes include Commodore Joshua Barney, who held his ground at Bladensburg and was wounded and captured; First Lady Dolley Madison, who sacrificed her personal property to save White House treasures, including Gilbert Stuart’s famous portrait of George Washington; Maj. Gen. Samuel Smith, who oversaw the defense of Baltimore; and Maj. George Armistead, who commanded Fort McHenry and whose family preserved the garrison flag now on permanent display at the Smithsonian. Madison and Monroe, by contrast, come in for some criticism, the former for his lackluster wartime leadership, the latter because his meddling at Bladensburg undermined the American defenses. The goats of the campaign are Armstrong, who did almost nothing during the crisis, and Winder, who proved himself wholly unqualified for the important command that he held.

The British heroes are Maj. Gen. Robert Ross, who captured Washington but was killed outside Baltimore, and Admiral Cockburn, who inspired the capture of Washington and caused havoc with his raids in the Chesapeake, freeing a great many slaves in the process. Many junior officers—such as Maj. Harry Smith, Lt. George de Lacy Evans, and Lt. George Gleig—distinguished themselves as well, going on to successful military careers. The overall British commander in the theater, Adm. Sir Alexander Cochrane, would have called off the attack on Washington, if he could have, and was unfairly vilified by the British Army for the disaster at New Orleans.

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7. *The British Invasion of Maryland, 1812–1815*, ed. Louis Henry Dielman (Baltimore: Soc of the War of 1812, 1913).

8. *The Perilous Fight* (NY: Farrar and Rinehart, 1945).

9. *James Madison: Commander-in-Chief, 1812–1836* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961).

10. *Ibid.*, 284–325.

11. New York: Norton, 1972. Lord was a prolific popular writer who had published earlier bestsellers on the Titanic, *A Night to Remember* (NY: Holt, 1955), and Pearl Harbor, *Day of Infamy* (NY: Holt, 1955).

12. E.g., Scott S. Sheads, *The Rockets’ Red Glare: The Maritime Defense of Baltimore in 1814* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater, 1986), Joseph A. Whitehorne, *The Battle of Baltimore, 1814* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Pub, 1997), Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1998), and Christopher T. George, *Terror on the Chesapeake: The War of 1812 on the Bay* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Pub, 2000).

13. Viz., James Pack, *The Man Who Burned the White House: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1987), and Roger Morriss, *Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853* (Columbia: U South Carolina Pr, 1997). Worthy of special note is Ralph E. Eshelman and Burt Kummerow’s lavishly illustrated *In Full Glory Reflected: Discovering the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake* (Baltimore: Maryland Hist Soc, 2012).

With *Through the Perilous Fight*, journalist Steve Vogel¹⁴ has made a fine contribution to the literature on the Chesapeake Campaign, drawing extensively on the available primary and secondary sources. His vivid narrative style will appeal to a wide readership. His judgments about the leading figures of the campaign are conventional but sound. The book follows a strict chronology, laying out what the principal actors were doing at any given time. Vogel's deft use of subheadings ensures that readers will not be confused by his sometimes choppy narrative, but will instead get a clear picture of what was happening at various locations. The book features exceptionally good maps¹⁵ created by Gene Thorp and is graced with many contemporary illustrations.

Vogel's study is not without errors. He mislabels a 74-gun ship as a frigate (3); places forty-five major British warships in American waters at the beginning of the war, when in fact only the twenty-six at Halifax were available for service (48); and states that Napoleon abdicated unconditionally on the sixth of April 1814 (it was the eleventh) (50). Regular officers did not outrank *all* militia officers, only those of the same or lower rank (215); and George Prevost was not a "Lord" and his army was not defeated at Plattsburgh (353). Finally, there is no evidence that the British sold any runaway slaves back into slavery; in fact, both governments thoroughly investigated these claims after the war and dismissed them (397).

Unfortunately, Vogel was unable to take advantage of some valuable work published after his book went to press. Thus, he follows conventional wisdom in characterizing Adm. Sir John Borlase Warren as "lethargic" (33), when Andrew Lambert has now made a strong case¹⁶ that the British commander did as well as he could with the limited resources the Admiralty gave him. Ralph Eshelman's pioneering work on the burning of Washington¹⁷—a phrase Eshelman eschews because only about 5 percent of the buildings in the city were affected—has argued persuasively that the glow in the sky seen from miles away likely came not from (mainly brick and stone) buildings burning in the capital, but from the Washington Naval Yard, where wooden structures and other combustibles were burned by US forces. Finally, Fort McHenry Park Ranger Scott Sheads has traced the term "War Hawk" back before the War of 1812 at least to 1792.¹⁸

Vogel cannot, of course, be faulted for ignorance of research not yet available when he wrote, and his mistakes are minor. All in all, his first-class study is a worthy successor to Walter Lord's work.

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The second recent book under review here is by Peter Snow, a veteran print and television correspondent and commentator.¹⁹ His well researched account of the Chesapeake Campaign is shorter and breezier in style than Vogel's. His eye for detail helps bring to life the many personalities in this story, though he sometimes gives too much credence to memoirs written long after the campaign.

Snow states that he was moved to write this book by his discovery of how few people knew about the campaign (241). Though this lack of familiarity is truer in the United Kingdom than in the United States, Snow's book is perfectly serviceable for readers on both sides of the Atlantic who want a fast-moving and engaging account. Each of its short chapters has a subtitle indicating the pertinent date of its content, which ensures that readers may easily follow the chronology of the narrative. Good maps are a welcome enhancement.

When Britain Burned the White House is a timely reminder that the War of 1812 was merely a sideshow for the British, who remained preoccupied with Napoleon and affairs in Europe. They had no desire to "re-impose British rule" on the United States and "never intended to repossess the country" (7, 233). But Snow

14. A longtime reporter at the *Washington Post*, he is also the author of *The Pentagon: A History* (NY: Random House, 2007).

15. Esp. the one of Washington, showing both Madison's route when he fled and then returned to the capital and the locations of key buildings in the city (166), and the one for the British assault on Baltimore (290–91).

16. In *The Challenge: Britain against America in the Naval War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) 268–69.

17. "Washington City: Myths from the War of 1812," in White House Hist. Assoc., ed., *America under Fire: Mr. Madison's War and the Burning of Washington* (Washington: David M. Rubenstein Nat'l Ctr for White House History, 2014) 33–46.

18. See my "'War Hawks': Using Newspapers to Trace a Phrase, 1792–1812," *Journal of Military History* 78 (2014) 728.

19. He has written several earlier books, including *To War with Wellington: From the Peninsula to Waterloo* (London: John Murray, 2010). His wife is a granddaughter of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

does strike a few false notes. Winder was district commander, not commander-in-chief, a title reserved for the president (38, 49, 91); Armstrong never took command of the US troops on the Canadian frontier (24); and Cochrane did not, and could not (as Snow well knows), call off the campaign against Washington (66–67). It is impossible to know who actually killed Ross (199), and the claim that Washington was burned in retaliation for the burning of the public buildings in York has been discredited (112, 137).²⁰ In addition, Wellington did not actually refuse the American command; he merely said he could not leave Europe until the spring (232). Finally, the Iron Duke's claim, repeated by apologists of the British army ever since, that Cochrane engineered the Gulf Coast campaign as a plundering expedition to earn prize money is without merit (183). These errors, however, do not significantly detract from a fine account of the campaign.

With the bicentennial of the War of 1812 behind us, these two books are likely to be the last we will see on the Chesapeake Campaign for some time, though each generation will want a fresh account of its inherently dramatic events. Given all the works on the subject published since Walter Lord's landmark book, we now have an embarrassment of riches to choose from. Among these, Steve Vogel and Peter Snow have written enlightening and entertaining accounts of the campaign.

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20. See further my *Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 2006) 85–87, and Donald E. Graves, "Why the White House Was Burned: An Investigation into the British Destruction of Public Buildings at Washington in August 1814," *Journal of Military History* 76 (2012) 1095–1127.