

# H-Net Reviews

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George C. Daughan. *1812: The Navy's War*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. 528 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-02046-1; ISBN 978-0-465-02808-5.

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## Sheppard on Daughan

With the bicentennial of the War of 1812 upon us, we can expect a host of new books on this once “forgotten conflict” in the next three years.[1] George C. Daughan, author of the Samuel Eliot Morrison Award-winning *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy, from the Revolution to the War of 1812* (2008) sets a high standard for forthcoming volumes with his excellent work on the role of sea power in the country’s second conflict with Great Britain. While *1812: The Navy’s War* focuses on the maritime fight, it does not do so exclusively. Daughan sets the young American navy’s battles with British in the context of domestic and international politics of the era, showing how maritime victories reaped lasting political benefits, despite the fact that the war itself ended in a stalemate.

While the Treaty of Ghent restored American and Canadian territory to *status quo ante bellum* and ignored most of the issues that led to war, Daughan argues that the United States gained much from the conflict, largely thanks to the efforts of its navy. He contends that Great Britain held far more ambitious war aims than merely punishing the upstart nation or maintaining the Royal Navy’s right to impressment. Lord Liverpool planned to use the war to expand Britain’s holdings in North America and, more importantly, permanently cripple its former colonies as a maritime rival. Facing such a threat, survival and recognition as a legitimate foe constituted a tremendous success for the young republic. Daughan clearly sides with those historians who view the war as a victory for the United States. Despite failing at their ini-

tial objectives, the country survived a British onslaught and earned the respect of Parliament and the Royal Navy. The U.S. Navy deserves the bulk of the credit for these successes.

Such victories cannot, however, be attributed to exemplary American leadership. Daughan pulls no punches in his depiction of the American government and land forces. On the basis of ample evidence, he paints the civilian leadership from President Madison down as woefully unprepared at the start of the war and poor managers throughout the fighting. The navy, however, comes through unscathed in his analysis, and he tends to view decisions of naval leaders in the best possible light. The navy’s every appearance is as a heroic force that saved the Jeffersonian party which had so vehemently opposed its creation. Such an interpretation has merit; James Madison had been among the foremost critics of building a navy during the Washington administration, and most Americans did assume that the Royal Navy would easily crush the United States’ maritime forces in the months leading up to the war. Instead, the navy won several truly spectacular victories that were of no small benefit at the peace negotiations. Still, naval officers possessed their own flaws. Infighting among officers and civil-military conflicts that reflected poorly on ship captains receive scant attention here, and one hopes that future authors will offer a more nuanced take on naval leadership.

Such flaws are more than balanced by Daughan’s con-

tributions to the literature on the war. Unlike other recent works on the naval War of 1812, *The Navy's War* places great emphasis on the fighting on the Great Lakes, acknowledging the victories of Oliver Hazard Perry and Thomas Macdonough as far more significant to the final outcome of the war than the morale-boosting but strategically negligible victories in single-ship actions on the oceans. It was control of the Great Lakes that enabled the United States to turn back the British advance in Canada, and the Duke of Wellington cited the lack of British control over the lakes as his primary reason for refusing command in the North American theater.

Moreover, Daughan places the war in its crucial European context, explaining in detail how the course of the Napoleonic Wars shaped British and American decision making and emphasizing the North American theater's secondary status to the European conflict. While they often verbally castigated Napoleon's imperial ambitions, American leaders were in the uncomfortable position of

needing him to keep winning while they fought Britain, and his defeat and (first) exile to Elba prompted an immediate scramble to negotiate a settlement. Despite its significance, few historians have bothered to systematically place the War of 1812 in the context of the Napoleonic Wars, and Daughan's analysis on this score is welcome.

Daughan's prose is first-rate, and his rousing accounts of battles at sea will certainly appeal to a popular audience. Historians may find his treatment of the navy itself unbalanced, and might wish for greater discussion on the role of privateering, but will still find this useful for its many contributions. All in all, *The Navy's War* is a worthy successor to *If By Sea*, and will surely remain a standard text on the conflict for some time.

#### Note

[1]. Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

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