

# H-Net Reviews

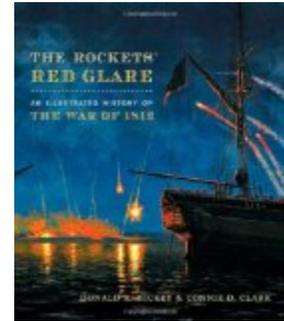
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald R. Hickey, Connie D. Clark. *The Rockets' Red Glare: An Illustrated History of the War of 1812*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Illustrations, maps. viii + 234 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-0155-3.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



## 1812 Illustrated: The Legacy of a Forgotten War

The bicentennial of the War of 1812 is passing with little fanfare. No wonder, a war that witnessed a bungled invasion of Canada by a poorly organized and logistically challenged military establishment, the burning of many of the principal buildings in Washington DC—including the White House, and the disappointing peace settlement of 1814 that settled for a lackluster status ante-bellum does not inspire chest-thumping patriotic enthusiasm in American breasts. With the exception of the United States Navy, which performed admirably in 1812, few are eager to celebrate this confusing, potentially embarrassing war. Donald R. Hickey and Connie D. Clark's book is perhaps the most fitting tribute to date because of its scope, crisp narrative, and impressive range of illustrations.

The United States, a fledgling nation after the American Revolution, remained dwarfed by other European powers. The newly minted country contributed to world markets with impressive profits from foreign trade, but still relied on Great Britain for many of its finished goods, and was hampered by ongoing war in the Atlantic between Britain and France. Hickey and Clark's first chapter, "Endless War in the Atlantic World: 1793-1812," recognizes the importance of America's position in the world and the ensuing difficulties that led to war with Great Britain. Hickey and Clark note that Great Britain and France were at various stages of war between 1689 and 1815 and that neutrals were seldom allowed respite from the ongoing conflict. Napoleon's increased efforts

to restrict British trade with Europe in his Continental System and the British reaction with the Orders-in-Council in 1807 worsened foreign relations. The United States answered this crisis with various trade restrictions and even an ill-fated embargo before embarking on a war with Great Britain.

Hickey and Clark's concise portrayal of the United States in a world context follows some of the best historiography of the subject. Jon Latimer writes, "Twin myths immediately grew up that it had been a glorious victory and a Second War of Independence; myths that suited the political establishment and the aspirations of former officers and generals to seeking to forge political careers." [1] Similarly, the major strength of this book is the detailed discussion about the legacy of the War of 1812 complemented and supported by many illustrations. The Battle of New Orleans becomes a palliative victory for the United States that can transcend other failures. "Most of all, they remembered the great victory at New Orleans ... for nearly a half century thereafter, cities across the nation treated January 8 as a holiday, celebrating [Andrew] Jackson's one sided triumph over the British" (p. 185).

The care and placement of political cartoons, commemorative posters, and ephemera in this work is immediately evident. The material produced during and after the war is an implicit argument for the conflict's important contributions to collective identity and nationhood. Certainly Hickey and Clark, like Latimer, believe

that Americans' collective memory and willful forgetfulness of some of the more unpleasant actions of the war is one of the most significant legacies of the War of 1812. Some of the most enduring symbols of America originate from the war, including Uncle Sam, the national anthem, and Old Ironsides.

Hickey and Clark reject the view of 1812 as a second war of independence. While this view is rightly rejected as a gross simplification, the motives for going to war with Britain (coincidentally not France, which also violated the neutral rights claimed by the United States) could have been examined more closely. Anglophobia could have been given a more prominent place in these arguments. Hickey and Clark, more concerned about the legacy of the war and its material manifestations, do account for the conflict's role in perpetuating negative and suspicious attitudes toward Britain. Undoubtedly that is true, but this only accounts for those attitudes post-1815. Other books have covered this ground in more detail. Samuel Haynes's book, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (2010), brilliantly parallels the relationship between the United States and Britain to other former colonies struggling to establish

themselves as not only politically independent, but culturally and economically as well.

Hickey and Clark's battle descriptions, diagrams, maps, and other illustrations also deserve considerable praise. Readers are often boggled by vague battle illustrations with little explicative value. Not so in this book! Even landscape illustrations are well chosen and accurately depict the challenges of the terrain. The Battle of Queenston Heights is an excellent example. Author-produced maps are put together with considerable care. Battle enthusiasts will find much to love in a detailed and careful description of individual battles throughout the book.

This work is an excellent, well-rounded book suitable for a wide audience. Readers inclined to celebrate the bicentennial of the War of 1812 ought to go to Montreal where the Canadians have planned extensive celebrations, or buy this book and immerse themselves in images from the struggle.

#### Note

[1]. Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

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