H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Walter Lord. *The Dawn's Early Light.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Illustrations, maps. 384 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4214-0547-6.

Reviewed by Dave Burford (Norwich University)
Published on H-War (August, 2012)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

In *The Dawn's Early Light*, Walter Lord recounts the events of Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane's Chesapeake campaign of 1814 and subsequent operations aimed at the capture of New Orleans during the War of 1812.[1] Lord claims that nothing did as much to pull the United States together as the "searing experience of losing Washington" followed by the "thrill of national redemption" when the same British force was unexpectedly repulsed outside of Baltimore just weeks later (p. 344). According to Lord, "the summer of 1814 found America threatened with national extinction," and his stated purpose of the book is to tell the story of "the turning point" after which "a whole new sense of national identity shone forth" (pp. 15, 344). Although scholars can criticize his selection and interpretation of events, he succeeds in his purpose.

In telling the story, this work is clearly not intended to be a formal study because analysis and thesis is generally eschewed. Lord uses his considerable skills, developed as an advertising agency copywriter, to tell a compelling tale by stitching together often trivial historical detail into understandable narrative accessible to a lay reader. The result is a well-written narrative-cum-popular history aimed at the general public audience. Compelling and often riveting, *The Dawn's Early Light* employs a journalistic style that imparts facts while retaining a sense of sensationalism and dramatic color. The lack of analysis can be distracting for scholars because many vignettes and plot lines compel the reader to wonder what the significance is. Usually Lord leaves the question unanswered. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds, the mosaic of scenes combine to form an image in the reader's mind that constitutes an answer. In this way, Lord presents views of events and personalities without explicitly stating or arguing those interpretations.

The power of the book comes from presenting both British and American sides of the tale, moving the story from high government officials, to admirals and generals, to soldiers and citizens, all of whom were caught up in conflict and overtaken by events. In addition to the well-known American themes of inept leadership, ill preparedness, and militia brittleness when confronting regulars in combat, less well-known British perspectives are offered: government instructions maintaining army-navy independence explains divided or conflicting British command decisions; Cochrane's perspective and stated operational vision ties together events at Washington DC, Baltimore, and New Orleans; and the Duke of Wellington's (Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley) remarks on the limits of descent to produce victory and assessment of British strategic options help explain British diplomatic moves at the Ghent peace talks.

Unfortunately, the book focuses almost exclusively on events in the Chesapeake Bay. Composed of a preface and thirteen chapters, eight chapters of the book are devoted to events culminating with the burning of Washington DC; an additional three chapters narrate the British attack at Baltimore; one chapter relates events leading to the Peace of Ghent; and the final chapter discusses events leading to the battle of New Orleans and provides the book's conclusion. The preface places the thirteen chapters in historical context by providing a synthesized and, for some historians, too concise synopsis of events leading up to the summer of 1814. Compared to the richness of the story in the first eleven chapters, some readers will be disappointed with the brief treatment of treaty negotiations and the New Orleans operation. Most egregiously for historians, the book omits military events along the Niagara Frontier, the naval ship-building race on Lake Ontario, and only briefly references military operations in New York and political events in New England.

Although well researched–Lord reports visiting twenty-eight libraries and archives–the book does not feature a bibliography or formal citations. Instead, source information is presented informally in a section entitled "Chapter Notes" that constitutes an essay organized by

chapter of "the sources that seemed most useful" (p. 351). The sources are well balanced and extensive, and encompass official records as well as numerous manuscript collections in Great Britain and the United States. However, scholars and researchers will find the actual citations disappointing because they are incomplete and do not follow a recognized standard.

Researchers or students looking to verify citations referencing earlier editions of this book will appreciate that the 2012 issue largely retains the pagination of the original edition. The latest edition adds a forward by Scott S. Sheads, a National Park Ranger at Fort McHenry. Pagination is maintained by replacing the original list of illustrations with Sheads's forward, renaming Lord's forward preface, and modifying the table of contents accordingly. For the general reader, included are sixteen pages of illustrations and seven maps, all reproduced in greyscale half-tone. In the current book, front and back endpaper maps of the original edition are collected together as a frontispiece.

Despite its scholarly weaknesses, *The Dawn's Early Light* is worth reading because it is a good example of well-written and well-researched popular history. It serves as a reminder that history is not only analysis, synthesis, and thesis but also a story of humanity featuring all the drama of the theater.

Note

[1]. First published by W. W. Norton & Company in 1972, *The Dawn's Early Light*, included in The John Hopkins University Press Maryland Paperback Bookshelf series, was initially reissued in 1994, and, celebrating the bicentennial, is again reissued this year (2012). For review of the 1994 reissue, see Cynthia H. Requardt, review of *The Dawn's Early Light*, by Walter Lord, *Washington History* 7, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1995/1996): 87-88. For reviews of the original 1972 edition, see Marietta M. LeBreton, review of *The Dawn's Early Light*, by Walter Lord, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 204-205; Frank A. Cassell, review of *The Dawn's Early Light*, by Walter Lord, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 30, no. 4 (October 1973): 682-683; and John S. Pancake, review of *The Dawn's Early Light*, by Walter Lord, *Journal of Southern History* 39, no. 1 (February 1973): 114-115.

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Citation: Dave Burford. Review of Lord, Walter, *The Dawn's Early Light.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.
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