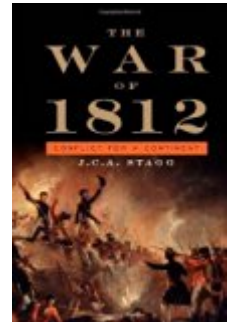


J. C. A. Stagg. *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent.* Cambridge Essential Histories Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 216 pp. \$89.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-89820-1.



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Published on H-War (September, 2015)

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It is safe to say that the bicentennial anniversary of the War of 1812 passed virtually unnoticed to a large majority of Americans. Having the misfortune of falling into that gray area between the excitement of the American Revolution and the fascination of the American Civil War, it is all too frequently brushed over in fast-paced American history classes in which professors struggle to maintain students' attention while teaching core requirements. The significance of the United States' second war with England, which may have equal importance in shaping the American nation as the first, is routinely glossed over and unknown to most Americans today. Fortunately, J. C. A. Stagg's new study may just be the book to revive the War of 1812 from its relative obscurity within the popular American narrative. Numbering fewer than two hundred pages, including an essay on his sources, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* offers general audiences a surprisingly complete yet concise historical narrative covering the war's social, political, and military aspects through a transatlantic perspective.

Historians familiar with the study of the War of 1812 will need no lengthy introduction to the author. One of the leading authorities on the early Republic and the War of 1812 and chief editor of over eighteen volumes of *The Papers of James Madison*, Stagg ably covers the complexities of the war in a concise yet comprehensive synthesis. Unlike his highly detailed and specialized 1983 publication, titled *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830*, which focuses on policy decisions of the Madison administration and their implications on the War of 1812 from an American perspective, here Stagg places the war into the larger transatlantic narrative providing comprehensive understanding of the multinational context while emphasizing its influence in shaping the future of the United States.

In *The War of 1812*, Stagg provides general audiences with a brief overview of the major factors responsible for the conflict, placing emphasis on the overall importance of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and the seemingly powerless position

of the American nation leading up to 1812, ultimately attempting to impose its will on circumstances that were largely beyond its control. Continuing his concise and readable narrative, Stagg chronologically recounts the war years from various perspectives within the North American continent, systematically explaining how the United States overcame serious challenges in the forms of poor military commanders, continued logistical failures, and divided political leadership in order to eventually achieve limited gains despite being unable to dislodge the British from North America. Concluding with an examination of the Treaty of Ghent and the peace that followed, Stagg returns his focus to the transatlantic world, uncovering the lasting effects of the war on the rise of the American state, as well as Canadian nationalism and European affairs. The end result succeeds on both desired goals—Stagg clearly illuminates the larger transatlantic influences guiding England and the United States to war in 1812, while also establishing the conflict's centrality in American state building and Canadian national identity.

Stagg's mastery of the secondary literature from which his study primarily draws quickly becomes evident in the book's introduction, where the author condenses almost two hundred years of historical memory into fifteen short pages. Here, Stagg introduces general audiences to the war's causes, briefly contextualizing several commonly attributed factors sparking conflict in 1812, including westward expansion, such maritime issues as the impressment of American seamen, and political competition within the United States. In addition to summarizing American historiography on the war, Stagg also addresses the importance of the war to Canadian and, to a lesser extent, British scholars. Expanding on this general overview of the war, chapter 1, titled "War," offers a prolonged examination into the war's causes, continually stressing the influence of international affairs on domestic issues in the United States. This section is most notable for highlighting that the growing threat posed to English sur-

vival from Napoleon vastly superseded concerns for violating American sovereignty. Additionally, Stagg makes a compelling argument explaining that the influential congressional faction, commonly referred to as "War Hawks," failed to represent the commonly associated unified block of western and southern congressmen pressing for war. Moreover, Stagg downplays the importance of these "War Hawks" in guiding the nation to war, ultimately contributing to the war's international maritime issues above all else.

The next three chapters take readers through the war year by year, placing increased emphasis on the fighting that took place along the border between the United States and Canada. Stagg offers glimpses into ill-supplied and mismanaged American efforts to conquer British settlements in Upper and Lower Canada, which were often led by incompetent commanders enabled through a distant and overwhelmed Madison administration. The chapters, although comprehensive and entertaining, notably omit discussion of the naval war, as well as its influence on the American economy during the war. Additionally, Stagg generally omits the history of the war that took place outside of the Old Northwest with the exception of his mention of Andrew Jackson's operation against the Creeks and a subtle mention of the Battle of New Orleans. These missing elements do not detract from Stagg's narrative, however, since a relatively short introduction work like this forces the author to leave out certain aspects in order to maintain his intended objectives.

Stagg closes with a chapter climatically titled "Peace," in which he examines the specifics of the Treaty of Ghent and the conclusion of the war. According to the author, this treaty would inextricably link both Great Britain and Canada with the United States in the decades following the war through agreements in trade and fishing rights with generally favorable terms for the United States. The war also virtually ensured that Canada would never be forced to become a part of the

United States, in addition to greatly contributing to Canadian nationalism. Within this brief yet informative and comprehensive reexamination of the War of 1812, Stagg successfully presents two hundred years of historiography, as well as the influential events of the war that defined the future of North America, while doing so in an engaging manner sure to engage with general readers. Americanists looking to reacquaint themselves with the events of the war and its transatlantic historiography will also benefit from Stagg's recent publication that contains a rather useful section titled "Essay on Sources," which offers an extremely detailed and comprehensive list of seminal and most recent works on various aspects of the War of 1812. Ultimately, Stagg should be commended for condensing the complexities of the war while presenting them in an approachable and concise way. *The War of 1812* will appeal to upper-level college students and those unfamiliar with the war, and will serve as the leading general introduction for years to come.

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Citation: Adam Rock. Review of Stagg, J. C. A. *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

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