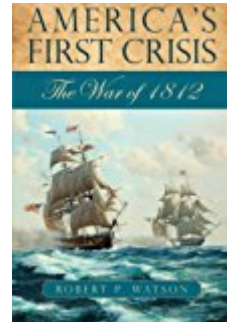


Robert P. Watson. *America's First Crisis: The War of 1812*. Albany: Suny Press, January 2014. 426 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-5134-3.



Reviewed by Gregg French

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The war that gave America “The Star-Span-gled Banner,” its first naval heroes, and seven future American presidents has all but been forgotten by the majority of Americans living in the twenty-first century. The War of 1812, which was fought between the British, the Americans, and these two countries’ Indian allies, actually occurred over a thirty-two month period between June of 1812 and February of 1815. Defined by its peculiar beginnings, its poor management, and the fact that it “ended in a costly and complicated tie,” it is not surprising that the War of 1812 has been overlooked by many modern Americans (p. 3). However, as Robert P. Watson argues in his book entitled *America’s First Crisis: The War of 1812*, the outcome of the war played a vital role in defining American sovereignty and resolving outstanding issues that had existed since the completion of the American War of Independence.

Coinciding with the bicentennial celebration of the conflict, the goal of Watson’s publication is to “help promote awareness of the people, places, and events of the war” (p. ix). Designed primarily

as a military history and aimed at the casual reader, the work is organized into thirty-six short chronological and thematic chapters. Unfortunately, these short chapters break up the narrative of the work, taking away from its overall flow and giving the academic reader a sense that he or she is actually reading a series of encyclopedia entries rather than a succinct historical work.

Watson begins the work by briefly outlining the popular memory surrounding the War of 1812, which is by far his most valuable contribution to the historiography surrounding the conflict. Watson then moves on to thoroughly describe for the reader the prewar period in an attempt to explain the curious circumstances surrounding the beginning of the conflict. Watson does this by placing the young American nation in a global context, caught between the powerful British and French empires during the Napoleonic Wars. He also accurately blames Henry Clay and his supporters, collectively known as the “War Hawks,” for causing the war by playing “into

American fears and passions while undercutting the voices of reason and peace” (p. 5).

Also within the global context of the prewar period, Watson attempts to outline the evolution of the United States’ transcontinental empire, as well as the United States’ relationship with American Indians. I believe that this is essential to understanding the War of 1812 and the history of American foreign relations during the nineteenth century. However, Watson sidetracks his own narrative by thoroughly discussing James Wilkinson, William Henry Harrison, and the Indian leader Tecumseh. Although I understand that where these individuals were born, their family histories, and their past experiences prior to the beginning of the War of 1812 may interest the casual reader, this information adds nothing valuable to Watson’s narrative and detracts from his discussion of the United States’ transcontinental empire, the country’s relationship with American Indians, and how these two issues related to the War of 1812.

The body of Watson’s work, primarily based on secondary research, begins by outlining the events that took place in the Great Lakes theater of the conflict. The work then shifts to discuss the war in the Atlantic Ocean and concludes by outlining the British attack on Washington, DC, the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, and the Battle of New Orleans. Although this portion does outline the series of events and battles that occurred during the conflict, it fails to offer the reader any new or unique argument about the conflict. However, Watson’s abilities as a writer are best displayed in this portion of the work. Despite the fact that this section is a repetitive series of names and dates, Watson is able to maintain the attention of the reader by vividly describing each battle in great depth. Periodically within this section of the work, Watson also attempts to move into the realm of social history by explaining how the war was experienced by civilians in British North America and the United States.

Overall, Watson accomplishes his stated objective to “help promote awareness of the people, places, and events of the war” (p. ix). His work also offers the reader a balanced perspective between the three major belligerents in the conflict: the United States, Britain, and the Indians of North America. However, the work lacks a unique argument and it fails to include an adequate amount of primary sources. Therefore, although the work is a useful resource for casual readers and high school students who are interested in the main actors and battles of the War of 1812, it would add little value to a university-level history course.

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