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Kevin D. McCranie. *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. xv + 365 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59114-504-2; ISBN 978-1-61251-063-7.

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The War of 1812 is generally an unrecognized affair. The bicentennial of the declaration of war came and went with little fanfare. It is fair to assume that the anniversary of disastrous surrender of Detroit will pass unmarked in August. Canadians likely will celebrate the Battle of Queenston Heights more vigorously than Americans come October. The War of 1812 will not be completely forgotten in the United States, but the remembrances will be centered on the naval aspects of the conflict. The War of 1812 was the navy's war. The battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain were the most important victories of the war and major achievements for the U.S. Navy. The ship-to-ship victories of the frigates *Constitution* and *United States* shattered the myth of the unbeatable Royal Navy. The navy even had a hand in the victory at Ft. McHenry. When Americans remember the War of 1812, they remember the accomplishments of the U.S. Navy. Historians are no different. In anticipation of the bicentennial, multiple titles on the U.S. Navy and the War of 1812 have been released recently. *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812*, by Kevin McCranie, stands out among the collection.

The first aspect of *Utmost Gallantry* that captured my attention was the rich detail provided by the author. I assumed that *Utmost Gallantry* would follow the highlights of the naval war, focusing primarily on the three frigate victories and the loss of the *Chesapeake*. Certainly, that narrative is included, but the ship-to-ship engagements are only one part of the work. It seems McCranie accounted for each cruise by a U.S. Navy vessel larger than a brig—and a few brig cruises, as well. In doing so, he provides some fantastic analysis of the impact of each

voyage. McCranie details the exact reaction of the Royal Navy by showing how many warships were sent in pursuit of U.S. Navy vessels. Sometimes the effect a single commerce raiding sloop had was impressive: the *Argus*, for example, captured twenty-one prizes in just a few months. The *Argus* sailed in British waters and threw English merchants into a panic. Mostly, however, McCranie makes it clear that U.S. Navy sloops were generally no more effective than privateers. What was most interesting was following the British reaction to the cruises of the *President*. It is well known that Commodore John Rodgers never won a dramatic ship-to-ship engagement, nor did he have any great success tracking down and capturing convoys—even British merchantmen sailing singly seemed to elude Rodgers more often than not. Although Rodgers was the model of naval professionalism, as a ship commander during the war he was a failure. McCranie's work illustrates, however, that Rodgers may not have gained the fame or riches desired, but his cruises aboard the *President* gave the British anxiety. At one point in the summer of 1813, the Royal Navy had more than fifteen men-of-war searching for Rodgers and the *President*. Commodore Rodgers may not have defeated an English frigate on the open sea, but as a disruptive force to the British, he was unparalleled. This attention to the wider repercussions of individual cruises by American war ships is unique and impressive and the perfect example of McCranie's exhaustive research.

The presentation of the Royal Navy's view of the war in *Utmost Gallantry* is equally laudable. It is not uncommon for historians of the naval war to approach it as a one-sided (American) affair, but the context of the

conflict is richer when the British perspective is given equal attention. One difficulty of British naval affairs that came through clearly was the communication problem between the Lords of the Admiralty and the various commanders of the North American station, particularly Admiral John B. Warren. It took weeks for Warren to receive instructions from the Admiralty, and often the commands he received conflicted with the realities of the situation. Warren also faced the unenviable task of requesting repeatedly a greater number of ships, which the Admiralty never looked upon kindly. As the number of tasks assigned to Warren increased—maintain a blockade, raid American commerce, engage the U.S. Navy when favorable opportunities arise, provide escorts to merchant convoys, seek out American privateers—so did the tension between the admiral and the Lords. Eventually Warren was replaced. McCranie’s decision to give the Royal Navy full inclusion also forces one to realize that after the summer of 1813, the Royal Navy dominated the war at sea. Every major American port was blockaded and the Britain’s Chesapeake campaign illustrates how British forces could move about the U.S. coast with virtual impunity. Havre de Grace, Alexandria, and Washington DC were severely damaged in amphibious raids before the British were eventually defeated at Baltimore. The might of the Royal Navy was unleashed in North American waters and there was little the U.S. Navy could do in response.

Utmost Gallantry is not without its flaws. There are times when McCranie does not take his analysis far enough. He will offer one or two sentences of keen, critical evaluation and stop, when he easily could have provided a paragraph or two. This seemed to be particularly true when McCranie was evaluating the leadership of William Jones—the U.S. secretary of the navy for the majority of the war. At one point, McCranie criticizes Jones for having an inflated view of himself: “Though

he [Jones] knew a great deal about ships, he thought he knew much more than in fact he did. When his officers disagreed, he saw their comments as a challenge to his competence.... Jones refused to accept the opinions of his officers” (p. 202). It is a harsh critique, and perhaps deserved, but McCranie does not provide enough information to make the argument convincing. A disagreement with Charles Morris over a rudder and another with a junior officer concerning the *Vixen* do not establish a pattern of behavior. McCranie’s criticism of Jones for misallocating the navy’s resources, particularly manpower, makes more sense and is demonstrated more fully. McCranie details the number of men sitting on blockaded ships who were desperately needed elsewhere, particularly the Great Lakes. It is clear Jones did not fully capitalize on the seamen he had available to him, although why he failed to do so remains a mystery. Which leads to my final critique—McCranie limits his work to the sea war. I find it disappointing that the naval war on the Great Lakes is not included in this work. The sea war is interesting, the frigate engagements are dramatic, but the battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain are the key American victories of the entire war—army or navy. When a historian writes about the naval aspects of the War of 1812 and excludes the fighting on the Lakes, he is only telling half the tale. It would have been exciting if McCranie had completed the story and lent his perspective on the conduct of the U.S. and Royal navies during the Lakes campaigns.

In all, Kevin McCranie’s *Utmost Gallantry* is an admirable work. It certainly stands out among the other more recent works on the naval conflict in the War of 1812. The intricate detail he provides regarding the operations of the U.S. and Royal navies elevates his work from a standard narrative of the war to a must read for anybody interested in fully understanding the fighting on the high seas during the War of 1812.

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