



Christopher M. Bonin. *Virginia in the War of 1812*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2018. Illustrations, maps. 185 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-7108-6.

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The War of 1812 gets short shrift in most historical circles, and as Christopher M. Bonin points out, there were only three other state-level monographs in print at the time of publication. Bonin's goal in publishing this expanded version of his master's thesis is to open the door for further research and interest in the topic, a worthy ambition. The short book's scope ranges from the Chesapeake-Leopard affair of 1807 through the end of the war in 1815 and mainly focuses on military and political matters. Despite the title, the book ventures beyond the borders of Virginia when discussing the role of Virginia troops in battles outside the Old Dominion as well as events and circumstances in Europe as they pertained to the war in the United States. The book is a meandering narrative, and as a result, there are not many arguments. If the book could be said to have a thesis, it might be that the War of 1812 was bad for Virginia.

The book begins with a summary of the Chesapeake-Leopard affair and establishes that the American sentiments toward belligerency with the British were higher at that point than they would be in 1812. Chapter 2 rapidly covers the period from 1808 to the outbreak of war in 1812, focusing on American politicians' political acrobatics to maintain neutrality while Britain and France duked it out in Europe. The next chapter

examines the controversy of support for and opposition to the war through the lens of Virginia newspapers, demonstrating that despite the prevailing view that the staunchest opposition to the war came from New England, there was vigorous dissent in the Old Dominion as well. The following two chapters discuss the character of the American and British forces; the chapter on the Americans emphasizes the burden that the lack of federal support put on Virginia and its militia, while the chapter on the British provides a general overview that is not specific to the British troops in Virginia. Chapter 6 departs from the Old Dominion as it follows some of its volunteer forces on their journey to fight in the old Northwest, giving special credit to the Petersburg Volunteers for their contributions to the defense of Fort Meigs. Chapters 7 and 8 narrate the war in Virginia in 1813 and 1814, respectively, focusing mainly on military engagements. A final chapter briefly touches on the costs of the War of 1812 for Virginia but mainly provides biographical notes on the various figures encountered throughout the book. The book ends with an ill-advised four-page conclusion that attempts to find similarities between the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the War of 1812.

That this book is an expanded version of a master's thesis is inescapable. Unfortunately, the limitations of the research and methodology

severely hinder the work. The primary sources are exclusively published sources and newspapers, with a noticeable absence of archival work. Local experiences are nearly absent from the story, and there is almost no treatment of the diversity of the Virginian experience. The emphasis is almost exclusively on the coastal region. It is not fair to critique a book for what it is not, but given the length of this piece, it seems justified to want more from what reports itself as a history of Virginia in the War of 1812. Bonin points out that the book “combines elements of military, political, and economic history, with a healthy dose of media criticism” (p. 4). Military and political matters dominate the narrative, and the use of newspapers is apparent throughout, but while economic issues arise, they are often only dealt with at the

most surface levels. Expanded investigations into the economics of the war and its impact on the lives of Virginians would be greatly welcomed. While discussing the lack of state-level monographs for the War of 1812, Bonin dismisses Stuart Butler’s *Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and Its Militia in the War of 1812* (2013) as focusing exclusively on the militia experience. By ignoring the social and cultural aspects of the war and only dealing with the economics in passing, Bonin produced a work that does little other than what Butler did but with less detail. Additionally, the book is replete with editing and grammar errors and parenthetical asides that disrupt the book’s flow.

This book has merit but only if others are inspired to continue the examination of the War of 1812.

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