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The Battle of Lake Champlain: A “Brilliant and Extraordinary Victory,” War in the Chesapeake: The British Campaigns to Control the Bay, 1813–14

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The Battle of Lake Champlain: A “Brilliant and Extraordinary Victory,” by John H. Schroeder. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 184 pages. \$26.95.

War in the Chesapeake: The British Campaigns to Control the Bay, 1813–14, by Charles Neimeyer. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2015. 256 pages. \$44.95.

In 1814, the United States faced a crisis of a magnitude not experienced since the Revolution and not to be exceeded until the Civil War. Congress declared war against the British Empire in 1812 to stop the impressment of sailors on American ships, to maintain the rights of neutral trade, and to stop perceived British support for Native Americans then violently opposing western settlement. Congress and the Madison administration expected a quick victory by ending British control over Canada. After all, Britain was locked in existential struggle with Napoleonic France and could send little assistance to its forces in North America. However, the British in Canada managed to turn back multiple American invasions. Even the stunning naval victory on Lake Erie in 1813 resulted only in local superiority. The key cities of Montreal and Quebec remained firmly in British hands.

With the abdication of Napoleon in 1814, Britain deployed large land and naval forces to North America. Britain’s goals were to retaliate for American depredations in Canada, permanently eliminate American military power on the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain, establish a neutral Indian territory north of the Ohio River, and seize New Orleans. The American treasury was almost empty, the Atlantic coast was under close blockade, American naval

power on the Atlantic was all but neutralized, and politically the nation was bitterly divided over continuing the war.

Two new books reexamine this period of national crisis. First, John H. Schroeder retells the dramatic story of turning back a powerful British invasion intended to clear Lake Champlain of an American military presence. Lake Champlain makes up a large segment of the traditional invasion corridor linking Montreal to New York City. In September 1814, ten thousand British soldiers, many of them veterans of Wellington’s victories in Spain, marched into New York State heading toward the American base at Plattsburgh. A strong Royal Navy squadron accompanied this formidable army. Defending Plattsburgh were a few thousand regulars and militiamen under Brigadier General Alexander Macomb. Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough commanded the naval squadron on the lake. Macomb and Macdonough were determined to defend Plattsburgh, and they prepared an integrated defense. Macomb stationed most of his soldiers in three earthen fortifications across the narrow peninsula formed by the Saranac River and Plattsburgh Bay. Macdonough deployed his four major war vessels anchored in line across the bay. This arrangement exploited American advantages—yet there would be no escape for either force if the British attacks were successful.

Sir George Prevost, governor general of British North America, directed a less-well-coordinated offensive. He urged Captain George Downie to attack Macdonough’s squadron. However, Prevost delayed the accompanying land assault to await the results of the fight on the water. Downie intended to lead a column of warships to pierce

the American line, but the wind and currents in the bay refused to cooperate. Instead, the four British warships came into close range of their opposites and anchored to begin a cannonade. Barely fifteen minutes into the fight, an American ball slammed into a British gun, dismounting it—and crushing Downie. The next ranking officer on the flagship could not locate the signal book to inform Captain Daniel Pring that Pring was now in command. As a result, each British skipper fought his own battle.

Schroeder recounts the well-known story of Macdonough's use of anchors and cables to rotate his big vessels to bring the maximum number of guns into action. Eventually, superior American gunnery prevailed, and one British vessel after another struck its colors. When Prevost learned that the Americans had shattered his naval force, he called off the land attack and led his frustrated troops back to Montreal.

While Schroeder adds little that is new to the oft-told battle narrative of this improbable victory, his notable contribution is the detailed analysis of how British defeat on this inland body of water affected the peace negotiations. The British ministry offered command in North America to the Duke of Wellington. The Iron Duke carefully spelled out the requirements for military success. In his analysis, Britain could not win a decisive victory until it controlled the water. Only this would yield the operational and tactical mobility to take advantage of the troop surge. Failing to control key lakes and rivers, Wellington opined, the government would be best served by ending the war as rapidly as possible. The ministry received the news of the failures at Plattsburgh and Baltimore in rapid

succession and sent new instructions to its negotiators in Ghent. Britain dropped its objectionable demands, and a treaty was signed on Christmas Eve.

The defense of Baltimore is the final chapter in Charles Neimeyer's excellent narrative of the campaign in Chesapeake Bay. As early as the spring of 1813, a formidable Royal Navy force under Sir George Cockburn entered the bay with the purpose of shutting down American commerce and persuading Madison to withdraw regulars from the fight in Canada to defend the cities, villages, and plantations along the hundreds of miles of coast and along rivers that empty into the bay. The Royal Navy raided with impunity. Captains ordered crews to torch villages, seize food and tobacco, and evacuate thousands of escaped slaves, sending them to freedom in British colonies. Yet Madison refused to redeploy his regulars from the northern campaigns, even after the burning of Washington.

Neimeyer relates this tale lucidly, weaving events and policy change with insightful analysis. The Americans responded to British raids with Commodore Joshua Barney's famed flotilla of gunboats. While Barney was ultimately forced to destroy his squadron to avoid capture, he and his flotillamen and accompanying Marines were the only bright spot in what was otherwise a debacle at Bladensburg, Maryland.

Neither author tells a new story, yet both Schroeder and Neimeyer provide a fresh look fortified with penetrating analysis. Their works are well-balanced, speaking perceptively to national policy, strategy, diplomacy, and joint operations from both sides. These are scholarly works written for a popular readership and are at the top of their genre.

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