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Ronald D. Utt, *Ships of Oak, Guns of Iron: The War of 1812 and the Forging of the American Navy*. Washington: Regnery, 2012. Pp. xxxv, 572. ISBN 978-1-62157-002-8.

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Although we are now in the midst of the bicentennial of the War of 1812, aside from a few scholarly conferences and museum exhibits, the conflict remains a “forgotten war” in the United States. By contrast, considerable attention has been paid to the anniversary in Canada, especially in the Province of Ontario, the principal theater of the Canadian portion of the war. This is hardly surprising: for Canadians, the war featured several dramatic moments when they turned back American attempts at invasion. The war effectively gave birth to Canadian nationalism.

The situation was otherwise for the United States. Driven by the fever of expansionism and national pride, Congress and President James Madison took the nation into a war that, in the event, proved enormously unpopular and, after three years of fighting, produced little or no gain for either side. (It must be noted that, while neither London nor Washington could claim to be the victor, Native Americans were certainly the losers.) The American army performed poorly on land, aside from the repulse of the British at Baltimore and Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans.

Ronald Utt (Heritage Foundation), like most historians of the war, glosses over the land campaigns to concentrate on the more exciting naval warfare. A few American (to quote the *Times* of London) “fir built frigates with strips of bunting and manned by sons of bitches and outlaws” (74) turned in a series of brilliant tactical victories, leaving the new republic heroic names of ships and men to inscribe in the national Pantheon.

The author begins his survey with useful biographical sketches of the principal players and a detailed, seven-page timeline. He then recounts events more or less chronologically, moving between land and sea. The opening chapter, for example, “Drift toward War,” is followed by the unhappy tale of “The Fall of Forts Detroit and Dearborn.” The story then shifts to the sea and the epic battle between the USS *Constitution* (“Old Ironsides”) and HMS *Guerriere*. Next comes “Back on Land: Failure at the Niagara,” followed by “Stephen Decatur Finds the *Macedonian*.” Such wrenches back and forth badly disrupt the narrative flow. In most instances (the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain excepted), what happened on the water did not relate directly to the operations on land. Military and naval historians often face the dilemma of how best to create a unified tale of a given “war.” In the case of the War of 1812, chronology may not be the best option. More extended treatment of specific campaigns over longer time spans yields greater narrative coherence and opportunities for more thorough analyses.

Utt undeniably writes with a powerful voice, presenting vivid descriptions of battles, as in this account of the engagement between USS *Argus* and HMS *Pelican* in St. George’s Channel on 14 August 1813:

Few of *Argus*’s shots hit their mark with any effect that morning, while *Pelican*’s return fire was devastatingly fierce and accurate. Within the first few exchanges, one of *Pelican*’s six-inch shots smashed through [Lt. William Henry] Allen’s thigh, nearly severing his leg. Allen was knocked to the deck, and though in pain and bleeding profusely, he attempted to maintain command while propped up on one elbow. He soon lost consciousness, however, and was carried to the hold where surgeon [James] Inderwick labored in a rising sea of carnage. First Lieutenant William Watson took over for Allen in the midst of a relentless broadside from *Pelican*. Heavy iron balls and deadly grape flying across the deck took off Midshipman [William W.] Edwards’s head and killed seaman Joshua Jones. A whizzing piece of grapeshot cut a crease through Watson’s scalp, exposing his skull and knocking him unconscious. Second Lieutenant Howard Allen now assumed command as

1. Donald R. Hickey’s book, originally published in 1989, retains its subtitle in its “Bicentennial edition”: *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 2012).

another broadside tore away at much of the rigging on the mainmast and ripped off the larboard shrouds supporting the foremast.... Within a few minutes, [Cdr. John Fordyce] Maples was finally able to cross under *Argus's* stern and rake her with impunity. *Argus* was dead in the water, her rudder inoperable, many of her guns knocked off their slides. Maples ranged round the floundering brig and poured in the fire. According to the surgeon's journal, Midshipman [Richard] Delphy, whose legs were nearly severed at the knees, survived for three hours.... George Gardiner lived for about half an hour after his thigh was taken off close to the body by a round shot. John Finley's head was shot off. (252, 254)

A look behind the lively narrative, however, reveals that most of Utt's sources are secondary. Even his quotations of participants in the war usually come from the works of later historians.<sup>2</sup> Nearly a quarter of his twelve hundred citations are of six authors: Henry Adams, Reginald Horsman, Donald Hickey, Tyrone Martin, John Mahon, and Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>3</sup> Lost is a golden opportunity to enrich his study by a wider and deeper investigation of archival sources available in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, or even of contemporary newspaper accounts and public documents, many now internet accessible. Diagrams of particular naval encounters are valuable, but the paucity of maps is a major drawback.

In this bicentennial season, *Ships of Oak, Guns of Iron* stands as a welcome appreciation of the supposed forgotten war of 1812. While its deficiency of new information or interpretations makes it unsuitable for scholars and serious students, its vigorous narrative style will delight a wide popular audience.

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2. He does, however, make good use of *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, 3 vols., ed. William S. Dudley, Michael J. Crawford, and Christine F. Hughes (Washington: Naval Hist Ctr, 1985, 1992, 2002).

3. Especially glaring omissions are two valuable works on the early US Navy: James E. Valle, *Rocks and Shoals: Order and Discipline in the Old Navy, 1800-1861* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1980), and Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1991).