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“THE BULLY HAS BEEN DISGRACED BY AN INFANT”—THE NAVAL WAR OF 1812

Kevin D. McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2011. Pp. xv, 365. ISBN 978-1-59114-504-2.

Andrew Lambert, *Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812*. London: Faber and Faber, 2012. Pp. xiv, 538. ISBN 978-0-571-27319-5.

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These two books, one by an American, Kevin McCranie (Naval War College), and one by a Briton, Andrew Lambert (King’s College London), represent the latest and perhaps final phase in a thirty-year cycle of new work on the War of 1812 at sea. American interest in this subject dates to the early days of the war, when US warships were surprisingly successful in single-ship duels against the Royal Navy. The heavy frigate *Constitution* defeated two British light frigates, *Guerrière* and *Java*, and in the process earned her nickname—“Old Ironsides”—when round shot from the *Guerrière* appeared to bounce off her 22-inch live oak hull. Likewise, her sister ship, *President*, defeated the light frigate *Macedonian* and took it as a prize of war.

These victories gave a badly-needed boost to American morale, after the disasters that befell US armies in Canada in 1812. “Our brilliant naval victories,” said an army officer, “serve, in some measure, to wipe out the disgrace brought upon the Nation by the conduct of our generals.”¹ One congressman bragged that “British arms cannot withstand American upon the sea. The bully has been disgraced by an infant.”² Great Britain was not accustomed to losing naval engagements: “It is a cruel mortification,” lamented one cabinet official, “to be beat by these second-hand Englishmen upon our own element.”³

In the course of the war, the British evened the score, capturing three frigates, the *Chesapeake*, *Essex*, and *President*. By mid-1813, the tide of the naval war had turned in Britain’s favor, but the Americans still crowed about their earlier victories against badly outgunned and outmanned British ships. Although there is no disgrace in losing to a more powerful ship, the British developed their own false narrative of the defeats, maintaining that the US frigates were ships of the line in disguise, manned by select, heavily British crewmen. None of this was true.

The strategically trivial American naval victories had no impact on the course of the war. The British made far more effective and significant use of their naval power in sending men and materials to Canada, convoying their merchantmen, and blockading and raiding the US coast, with devastating effects on the American economy, government finance, and public morale. But tales of transport, convoy, and blockade make for much duller reading than exciting naval engagements. By dwelling on naval battles, Americans set the historiography of the naval war on a course that persisted for nearly two centuries.

William James, a British lawyer in the Admiralty Court in Jamaica, found himself trapped in America at the beginning of the war; he became so fed up with American gloating that he wrote a monograph and a multi-volume naval history⁴ to demonstrate that the British performance in the war at sea had been far better than the Americans admitted. Although he repeated the usual British myths, his work is arguably the

1. Brig. Gen. Thomas Jessup to James Taylor, 28 Dec 1812, in Jessup Papers, Library of Congress, Washington.

2. Rep. Lempel Sawyer, 16 Dec 1812, in *Annals of Congress: Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789-1824*, 42 vols. (Washington, 1834-56), 12th Congress, 2nd session, 405.

3. The Earl of Harrow, in Bradford Perkins, *Castlereagh and Adams: England and the United States, 1812-1823* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1964) 18.

4. *A Full and Correct Account of the Chief Naval Occurrences of the Late War between Great Britain and the United States of America* (London, 1817), and *The Naval History of Great Britain, from the Declaration of War by France in 1793 to the Accession of George IV*, 5 vols. (London, 1822-24), revised in 6 volumes in 1826 and in many later editions with changes by the publisher.

first modern naval history. James could not access Admiralty records (closed to the public until 1929), but he did interview the principal British naval figures, examine the vessels, and read ship logs. He drew on this information to pioneer the practice of comparing the tonnage, crew size, and firepower of opposing ships and squadrons—now a standard technique among naval historians.

Following in James's wake, Edward P. Brenton, a British naval captain who had served on the American station during the war, published two works on the British Navy.⁵ Although his work lacks the rigor of James's, he had the advantage of having served in the navy, and even though he, too, repeated the British naval myths, his work remains an essential source of information and analysis.

There was virtually no American response to these British writers⁶ until the 1880s, when young Theodore Roosevelt joined the debate.⁷ A landlubber who had to learn about naval warfare in the Age of Sail from the keel up, Roosevelt went over the same ground as James, aiming to correct the record and show where James had either misunderstood or misrepresented the evidence. Determined to be fair, he was willing to follow the evidence wherever he thought it led. Although he lacked ready access to British records, his book remained for a century the benchmark American treatment of the naval war. There was very little interest in the conflict on the other side of the Atlantic, but works that did appear relied mainly on James and Brenton.

Two other Americans—Edgar S. Maclay and Alfred Thayer Mahan—contributed major works to the field. Maclay wrote a narrative history of the US Navy,⁸ and Mahan analyzed sea power in the War of 1812 mainly from a strategic perspective.⁹ For most of the twentieth century, the work of Roosevelt, Maclay, and Mahan shaped American views of the naval war of 1812.

This remained the pattern until the Naval Historical Center (now the Naval History and Heritage Command) published the first volume of a four-volume documentary history of the naval war in 1985.¹⁰ Based on a comprehensive search on both sides of the Atlantic, it has made essential primary sources easily accessible. The project in turn spawned a number of valuable naval biographies and warship studies. Then, with the bicentennial of the War of 1812 on the immediate horizon, several authors reexamined both the long-neglected British blockade of the US coast and the whole of the war at sea.

Wade G. Dudley argued that the British blockade of US warships and privateers in port had been a failure.¹¹ Brian Arthur, on the other hand, assessing the economic impact of the blockade, judged it a game-changing strategic success that had won the war for Great Britain.¹² One very recent book has surveyed the broader course of the war at sea, focusing on the management of operations by American and British officials ashore.¹³ Another concentrates on the clashes at sea with close attention to the European backdrop of the Anglo-American war.¹⁴

5. *The Naval History of Great Britain, from the Year MDCCLXXXIII [1783] to MDCCCXXII [1822]*, 5 vols. (London, 1823–25), and *The Naval History of Great Britain, from the Year MDCCLXXXIII [1783] to MDCCCXXXVI [1836]*, 2 vols. (London, 1837). Although the latter, revised edition is shorter, most scholars prefer it for its inclusion new material and greater accuracy.

6. Except for a long and sharp critique by novelist James Fenimore Cooper, who had served as a midshipman in the US Navy: see "Edinburgh Review on James's *Naval Occurrences*, and Cooper's *Naval History*," *Democratic Review* 10 (May/June 1842) 411–35, 515–41. Cooper's own naval history, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1839; rev. in 1 vol., 1841) did not challenge either James or Brenton.

7. See his *The Naval War of 1812* (New York, 1882; 3rd ed. 1883).

8. *A History of the United States Navy, from 1775 to 1893*, 2 vols. (New York, 1894); the book went through several later editions, taking the story up through 1902. N.b., the latter part of the naval war of 1812, originally treated in volume 2, was moved to the first volume in subsequent editions.

9. *Sea Power and Its Relations to the War of 1812*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1905).

10. William S. Dudley et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, 3 vols. (Washington: Naval Historical Ctr., 1985/1992/2002); vol. 4 forthcoming.

11. *Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812–1815* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2003).

12. *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812–1815* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 2011).

13. Stephen Budiansky, *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812–1815* (NY: Knopf, 2010), with review at *MiWSR* 2012-007.

14. George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (NY: Basic Books, 2011), with review at *MiWSR* 2012-034.

The books under review here are both learned and expansive. *Utmost Gallantry*, by Kevin McCranie, is founded on a thorough canvass of relevant sources in both the United States and the United Kingdom. It begins with a superb, badly needed overview of British naval resources at the beginning of the War of 1812. We learn that the Royal Navy had 515 vessels in service, but that almost all were stationed in European waters in support of Britain's war against Napoleonic France. The United States, by contrast, had only sixteen warships, not all of which were ready for service.

McCranie's primary interests center on strategy, very much in the manner of Mahan. But he does something that no other historian has done so systematically: he traces the cruises made by ships and squadrons during the war, providing excellent maps of the routes taken and the encounters and stops along the way. As a result, instead of simply introducing opposing ships for the first time when they engage, he shows just how and why they happened to meet.

The vastness of the oceans and difficulties of communication and transport in the Age of Sail loom large in McCranie's account. Ships were often deployed in search of an enemy long after circumstances had changed; this worked to the advantage of the Americans because the efforts of British ships and squadrons to find them were often frustrated by stale intelligence and the immensity of the oceans they were scouring.

Matters improved significantly for the British in the last year of the war, when they had enough vessels along the US coast to bottle up most American warships. After the war in Europe, the number of Royal Navy ships in service had fallen from 515 in summer 1812 to 349 at the end of 1814, but those committed to the American station increased more than fivefold, from 23 to 120. This paid dividends in providing British commanders with better, more timely intelligence—US newspapers were filled with what today would be classified material, and talkative Americans, not all of them anti-war Federalists, leaked sensitive information. Indeed, civilians on both sides were remarkably free in sharing whatever news they possessed, a legacy, perhaps, of a bygone era when war was the king's business and of no concern to the average person.

McCranie's analysis of the strategic thinking on each side is measured and scrupulously impartial. He notes that the British failed to keep American warships pent up in port early in the war and that the United States failed to disrupt British commerce later on. As for the outcome of the naval war, he concludes that "[even] though the British failed to destroy the United States Navy, they largely marginalized it, albeit at high costs in blood, treasure, warships, and time" (xii). The author's acute insights give this work a freshness missing from many treatments of such a well-studied subject.

Students of the naval war may find McCranie's discussion of the naval battles unsatisfying because he shows little interest in carefully measuring the advantages that each side enjoyed. For detailed inquiries into the size of ships and crews and the relative firepower of each side, interested readers will have weigh the accounts of Roosevelt and Maclay against those of British naval historians.

The book lacks precision, too, in treating the maritime issues that caused the war. The author exhibits a faulty understanding of the British position on naturalization and of the terms of the various trade restrictions adopted by the United States between 1806 and 1812. He also seems to credit the Admiralty with deciding to continue the war until both sides had ratified the peace treaty, but this decision was made by the government, not the Admiralty, and was embodied in the peace treaty. Article I of that agreement provided that hostilities would end only after both sides had ratified the treaty. Although these missteps do not undercut this superb naval history, they are evidence of a problem common among military historians—a poor grasp of the all-important political and diplomatic background of the military actions they seek to explain.

Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812, by Britain's most prolific and accomplished naval historian, Andrew Lambert, is a nice complement to *Utmost Gallantry*. Lambert is fully conversant with the workings of the British government—who made the key decisions and what motives lay behind them. In the case of the Admiralty, there was intense pressure to satisfy the needs of patrons, to keep the West India interests happy, and to maintain and build public support.

Lambert astutely situates the American war within a broader transatlantic perspective. He writes that "American hostility provided an annoying distraction" (64) from Britain's overarching aim in the period—

winning the Napoleonic Wars. Seen in this light, the War of 1812 was “a long-forgotten sideshow ... fought in the shadow of a far greater conflict” (1). The demands of the war in Europe made the British understandably loath to divert assets to America. Even after Napoleon’s abdication in spring 1814 ended hostilities on the Continent, the British still had to keep troops and ships in Europe to forestall any renewal of war and to ensure a favorable settlement at the Congress of Vienna.

When Adm. John Bolase Warren, the naval commander on the American station, could not accomplish what the Admiralty wanted with the limited resources he was given, Lord Melville, the First Lord of the Admiralty, grew peevish. “The American war was an awkward embarrassment for the government, and Melville blamed Warren for not making it go away” (85). Although Warren was replaced, “In reality Warren’s war was effective, economical, and above all successful” (269).

Lambert has cast his net much wider than McCranie and presents a great deal of information not readily found elsewhere. He has a particularly good chapter on the convoy system, which successfully thwarted US attacks on British commerce. No American warship broke up a convoy, and privateers could only hope to cut out a straggler or two. “The War of 1812 simply confirmed previous experience: commerce-raiding has never proved decisive—but defense of trade has never been able to eradicate all threats and stop all losses” (4). Although marine insurance rates in the Irish Sea soared, the steady rates that seem to have persisted elsewhere appear to bear out Lambert’s conclusion.

The book contains a perceptive analysis of razees, ships of the line cut down to compete with the American heavy frigates. Lambert shows that some British deserters were captured on American warships,¹⁵ suggesting that not all British tars in the US Navy at the beginning of the war had left the service to avoid fighting against their home country or being hanged as traitors. Still, Theodore Roosevelt’s estimate that they never constituted more than 10 percent of any crew sounds about right.

The paucity of footnote documentation often makes it hard to identify Lambert’s sources, and the book’s maps are too small in scale to be of much use. On the other hand, the naval sketches, especially the bird’s-eye view of the profile of the US heavy frigate *President* and the British light frigate *Macedonian*, are illuminating, as is the fine gallery of color pictures.

It is unfortunate that Lambert, like William James, feels compelled to extol the British and the “ubiquitous, all-conquering, omnipresent” (275) Royal Navy. He accepts the contemporary British view that the explosive-laden American booby-trapped vessels deployed against the British blockading fleet in Long Island Sound were “indiscriminate terror weapons” (246–47); it is difficult to see how their use differed much from the targeting of warships with explosive shells. Nowadays, the term “terrorism” is usually reserved for the deliberate targeting of innocent civilians.

In this same vein, whenever the evidence is ambiguous, Lambert plays up sources that put the British in the most favorable light, often dismissing contrary evidence. Thus, he treats the three British victories over US frigates in loving detail, while US victories over British frigates get only a few pages of coverage. He insists that the *Endymion* alone took the *President*, when even Edward Brenton concedes that the presence of the trailing British squadron limited the options open to the American vessel. He also inflates the reputation of the *President*’s commander—Stephen Decatur—dubbing him “the best officer in the United States Navy” (373). He exaggerates, too, the rank of the *President*, calling it variously “the national flagship,” “the American flagship,” “the Federalist flagship,” and “an American icon” (2, 4, 43, 68, 408, 430).

Lambert makes dubious and erroneous claims about the causes of the war. He asserts, for example, that the Fox Blockade of 1806 alienated Americans, when in fact it was welcomed by them because it tacitly set aside the *Essex* decision restricting US re-export trade. He writes as well that France’s Berlin Decree violated Franco-American treaties, but all such treaties had been suspended as part of the settlement at the end of the Quasi-War in 1801 (14). He maintains that President James Madison knew that Napoleon had invaded Russia when he submitted his war message to Congress (56), but news of the invasion did not reach the United States until many weeks later. He says the war was popular with Republicans “because it offered a

15. Some, however, had served on American ships for so long as to be citizens in all but name.

golden opportunity to seize land from the British and the Indians” (395),” although all the contemporary evidence suggests that Americans were genuinely concerned about the threat posed by the British maritime practices to US sovereignty (3).

On occasion, Lambert seems unfamiliar even with British policy, as when he calls the impressment from the US frigate *Chesapeake* in 1807 “unprecedented and illegal”; it was neither. The British had impressed men from the USS *Baltimore* in 1798, and when the *Chesapeake* affair demanded a response, there was genuine confusion among cabinet officials over the targeting of neutral warships. The records show that British officials, who had hitherto taken no position on this matter, now adopted one by offering to disavow the action and pay compensation to the victims. Similarly, although the British embargoed all US ships in port upon the declaration of war, they were subsequently permitted to sail home under special license in hopes that the repeal of the Orders-in-Council (shortly after the declaration of war) would end the conflict (84).

Lambert also makes sketchy claims about the end and aftermath of the war. Knowledgeable readers will be puzzled by his contention that Andrew Jackson did not follow up on his victory at New Orleans because his “victorious army preferred tracking down fugitives slaves” or that “slavery won the War of 1812” (344–45). His assertion that a belligerent’s right to search neutral ships was an issue in the war (387) is baseless. Lambert insists that, in the peace negotiations, “Americans conceded Britain’s core war aims, maritime belligerent rights and impressment, at the outset,” and that the Treaty of Ghent “upheld British maritime rights” (313, 385, 388, 399). But the treaty did not mention these issues, which remained open questions and the subject of subsequent diplomatic exchanges. Impressment resurfaced as late as 1842 in the negotiation of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty and some of the other maritime issues as late as World War I.

Lambert grows hyperbolic in flatly stating that “Americans did not have their own culture” (411) before the War of 1812, although it is undoubtedly true that, by turning the war into a glorious triumph, they helped define that culture. He oddly discounts American successes in the war—“Quite why three combat victories over markedly inferior opponents should be such a source of pride is hard to understand” (409)—and states that, while the United States invented victory after the war (which may be true), “the British learnt useful lessons about strategy, tactics, discipline and organization” (451). But Lambert omits the most important lesson of all—that the best way to defend Canada was to accommodate the United States. This was the principal rationale for Britain’s long-term policy of rapprochement with the United States in the nineteenth century and explains why they were so often willing to sacrifice other imperial interests to keep the republic happy.

These are but a sampling of Lambert’s errors and dubious claims. They suggest a penchant, especially when dealing with American topics, to make airy generalizations and deliver questionable judgments without looking at the evidence. Still, one should not dismiss the work as a mere polemic, because it sheds a bright light on the naval war as seen from the long-neglected British perspective. As long as they take certain biased judgments with a grain of salt, readers will learn a great deal from *Challenge*.

As the bicentennial of the War of 1812 winds down, these valuable books by Kevin McCranie and Andrew Lambert may well mark the end of a historiographical cycle. If so, they will endure as fitting monuments to mark the occasion.