

Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812. By Robert Malcomson

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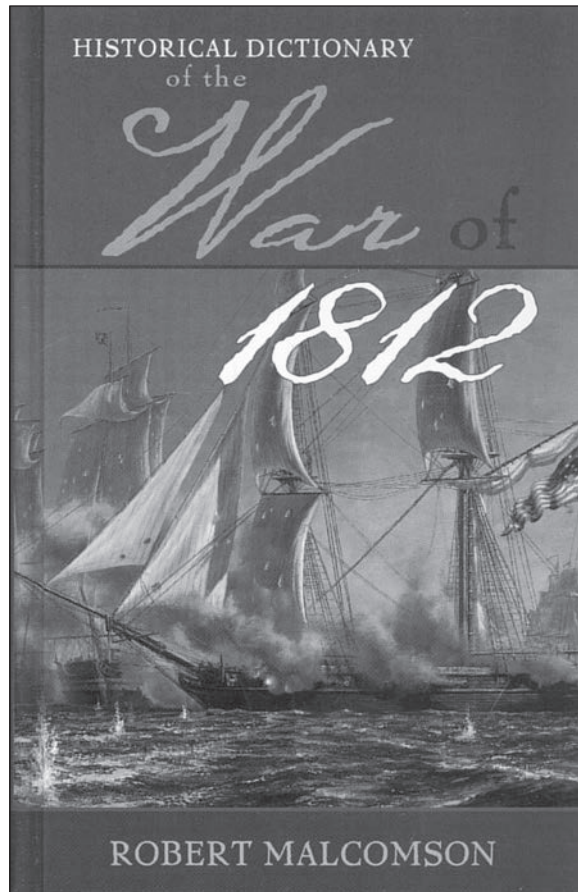
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Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812.

By Robert Malcomson. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006. lxii + 701 pp. US \$125.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-8108-5499-6.

The bicentennial of the War of 1812 is rapidly approaching. Indeed, the two-hundredth anniversary of the *Chesapeake-Leopard* incident, which greatly increased maritime and political tensions between the United States and Great Britain, occurs in June of 2007. Five years from that month will mark two hundred years since the United States declared war, setting off a conflict that would be played out world-wide at sea and along the coasts of North America but focus its greatest intensity on Canada and the northern American states.

The fighting that took place between 1812 and 1815 resolved little at the time but ultimately influenced the development of both Canada and the United States. That the conflict is dimly remembered today in the latter country is largely due to the fact that it was overshadowed in the mid-nineteenth century by a cataclysmic civil war. Although the War of 1812 is better understood in areas of the United States where active fighting took place and where many historic sites are preserved, the conflict has traditionally enjoyed greater public recognition in Canada, particularly the province of Ontario. Even there, however, time and change have eroded popular understanding of the events and people of a small but significant North American war. Robert Malcomson's *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812* should freshen the memory,



if only by making a vast amount of background information readily accessible to historians, teachers, students, and anyone else interested in the conflict.

Malcomson and his publisher are quick off the mark in making this work available, as bicentennial observances and publications are in the planning stages. The dictionary is useful, useable, well organized and well cross-referenced; it is packed with facts to guide the historian and satisfy the curious, though less-informed, student or amateur. The book contains a helpful chronology of events and a solid introduction to the scope of the fighting and related political develop-

ments. Malcomson's treatment is balanced and fair to the opposing sides, a welcome tone in a work about an historical event that is often perceived very differently in Canada and the United States. Malcomson includes an extensive bibliography.

The dictionary itself is comprehensive in its coverage, and very little of importance has been overlooked. It took me some effort to identify subject matter that had not been included. Michigan's Fort Gratiot, built in 1814 to control the outlet of Lake Huron, missed the cut, but readers will find most other fortifications, places, events, and battles described and explained in more than enough detail to answer casual questions and guide further research. Malcomson has included numerous biographical entries, many describing junior officers brought to prominence by the small-scale actions of this little war. There are also "biographies" of British, Canadian, and United States military units and naval vessels, with useful information on the construction, armament, and crew size of the latter. The often arcane details of military and naval organization, ranks, technology, and terminology are explained as well, a feature that should prove particularly valuable to those less familiar with the workings of combat forces of two centuries ago. Political events, politicians, and even the more famous rallying cries that expressed the intensity of wartime feelings and propaganda have also been included.

Given the author's attempt to identify comprehensively the people, places, and things of the War of 1812, some errors are bound to creep. Specialists in the war or its component events are likely to find a few mistakes of fact, interpretation, or omission, many of which are likely a result of dependence on the published sources consulted in preparation of the

dictionary. These errors are generally minor, as evidenced by a few examples from one theater of the war. Michigan Territory became a state in 1837, not 1818. The enrolled voyageurs who participated in the 1814 capture of Fort Shelby at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, were called the Mississippi Volunteers, not the Canadian Volunteers. Fort Lernoult at Detroit was renamed Fort Detroit in 1805, not 1796. Historians familiar with other regions of the conflict will probably find similar lapses, but overall the text is solid, accurate, and well suited to a broad readership.

The bibliography is extensive and includes many monographs and articles relating to individual actions. Its organization is perhaps divided into too many categories for easy use, but a listing of its contents helps, and a little patience will guide the reader to the necessary sources.

Malcomson includes a brief selection of maps at the front of the book. Most are contemporary with the War of 1812. Given their small reproduction format, however, the publisher might better have opted to use sharper, modern cartography to identify places mentioned in the text. Aside from the modern rendering of the Chesapeake Bay area, the maps are of little use for that purpose.

These few faults detract little from an otherwise invaluable reference guide to the War of 1812. The book is expensive but well worth the cost for libraries, historic sites, and serious students of an important though often misunderstood episode in the history of North America and Canadian-American relations.

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