

## *Fire Along the Frontier: Great Battles of the War of 1812* by Alistair Sweeny

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## *Fire Along the Frontier: Great Battles of the War of 1812*

By Alistair Sweeny

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2012. 272 pages. \$24.99 paperback. ISBN 978-1-459704-33-6 ([www.dundurn.com](http://www.dundurn.com))

Alistair Sweeny's "Fire Along the Frontier" is not a conventional history work. The book is, to me, more like part of a free-wheeling conversation which one might expect to experience among friends around a table with a couple of drinks: not unpleasant, lots of original opinion, and frequent moral quips. It is devoid of bibliography and sparse in references or notes to explain the numerous unattributed quotes used throughout. He does offer a companion website with supplemental information; something I found uncomfortable with and to which I did not refer.

Mr. Sweeny begins his journey into the War of 1812 with the acknowledgment that he approaches the subject with an "outsider's view" of the war, an "outsider peeking through... a crack in the logs of a barracks wall."

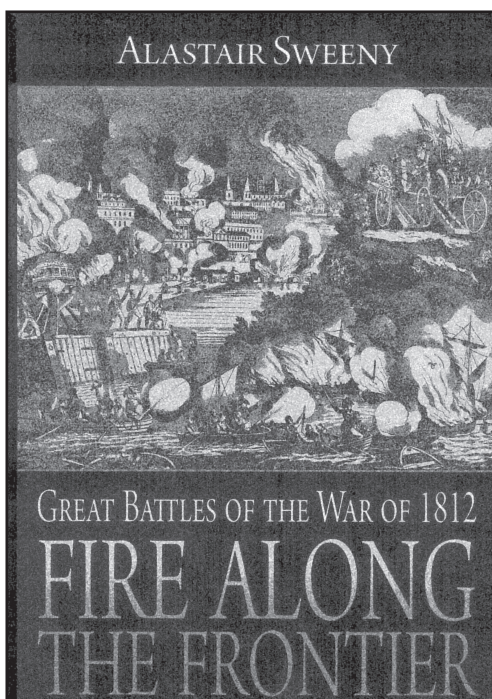
In the first several chapters, the reader is told that George Prevost was born in New York [in reality, New Jersey] and that James [in reality, Thomas] Macdonough thrashed the British fleet on Lake Champlain. Shortly thereafter, the author attributes to George Prevost a plan for a "four-part watery invasion of the United States... that could be used to influence peace talks." The well documented plan, widely known among the war's scholars, had its roots in the 1812 urges of John Borlase Warren and was advanced, not by Prevost, but by the orders of Bathurst, the British Secretary of War, who directed the actions which would end the war with the United States.

In a comment regarding John Jacob Astor, Sweeny states, "During the war, he also

kept friendly relations with President Madison's wife Dolley..." followed parenthetically by, "(Astor also held a mortgage on Dolley Madison's Washington House.)" The context might lead the casual reader to believe that Mrs. Madison had a separate house in Washington during the war. The loan was not arranged until the early 1840's after James Madison's death and Dolley's return to Washington. The facts of the loan are not related to the war.

Among other issues, there is a continual and distracting reference to American General Dearborn as "Granny", the description of a carronade as being a "super mortar" or "marine mortar" (physically and balistically different from a carronade), a mention of carcass shells as being "full of phosphorus" (vs. what really would have been tars, sulphur, salt peter, mineral spirits, black powder, etc.), and footnotes directing the reader to sources such as an unspecified "U. S. Army History" and a "southern delegate."

Of the results of the Battles at Plattsburgh, Sweeny states that "Macdonough's quick victory ended the danger of British invasion from the north... but General Maccomb got all the kudos... press showered him with praise... War Department promoted him to major general... Congressional Gold Medal... and the state of New York gave him... acres of land." It should be noted that all which Sweeny states after "got all the kudos" is true but Macomb did not stand alone in recognition. Four gold medals were struck for the American actions at Plattsburgh; i.e., one each for Thomas Macdonough, Robert Henley, Stephen Cassin, and Alexander Ma-



comb. Macdonough was promoted to Captain and the State of Vermont gave him acres of land. In the weeks and months after the war's end, these gentlemen were hailed as heroes, celebrated at meals in their honor, and were presented with many gifts in recognition of their military accomplishments.

In general, the basic story lines and well-known facts of the major battles of the war are presented. Mr. Sweeny does raise several interesting points: such as those in his

discussion of American expansion and the sense of outrage raised to gain support for it; privateering as one of the prime irritants throughout the war; and the war's resulting monetary drain on the populations of both belligerents as a factor in ending it. Unfortunately, the folksy, unconventional style and numerous typographical errors detract from this effort.

Mr. Sweeny's introduction speaks to inaccuracies that have crept into the body of history through "puffed up" or ignored events and he notes that in the internet age, "it's much harder to twist history and tamper with historical truth." He states, "the best way to remember the dead of the War of 1812 is to tell their story unblemished." With this statement, I agree. I commend the direction of his thought but submit that, however unintentional, his work offers the confusion which he professed not to advance and which I suspect results from inattention, and a lack of familiarity with the basic documents of the war and the existing body of objective historical fact.

I would not recommend "Fire Along the Frontier" as a "must read" for inclusion in any War of 1812 bibliography. For a more accurate and balanced view of the war, I would suggest J. Mackay Hitsman's *The Incredible War of 1812*.

**Keith Herkalo**

President, Battle of Plattsburgh Association

### *Bridging Two Peoples: Chief Peter E. Jones, 1843-1909*

By Allan Sherwin

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012, 270 pp. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-554586-33-2 ([www.wlupress.wlu.ca](http://www.wlupress.wlu.ca))

**P**eter Edmund Jones, the third son of the famous Reverend Peter Kakewaquonaby Jones and Eliza Field, was the "first known Status Indian to obtain a M.D. degree

from a Canadian medical school". But what we find as we read through Dr. Sherwin's work is that the practice of medicine was for Jones just a small part of his life.