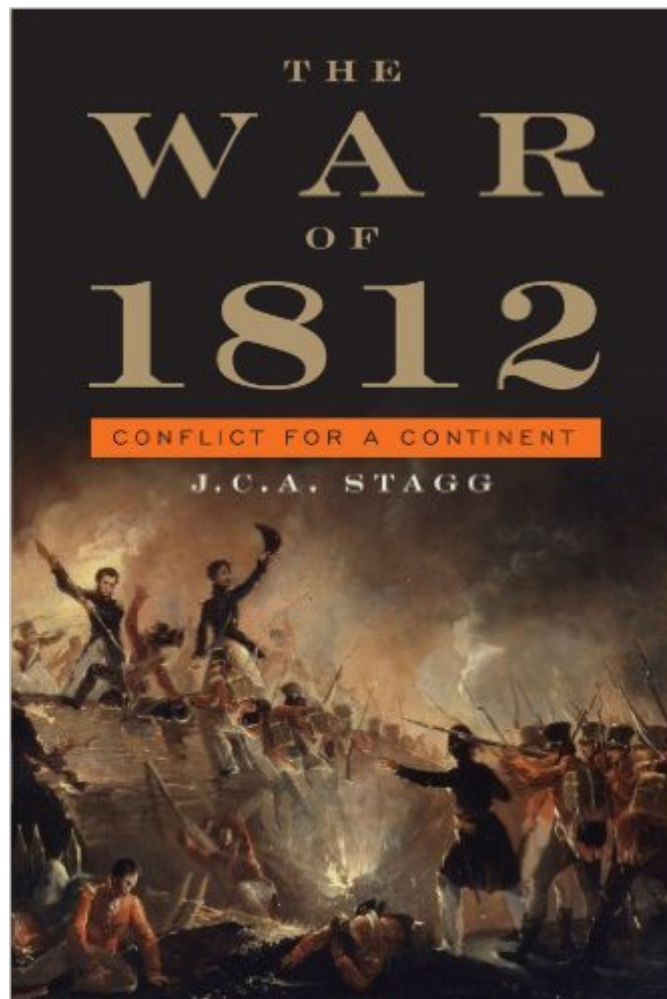


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The War Of 1812: Conflict For A Continent (Cambridge Essential Histories)



Synopsis

This book is a narrative history of the many dimensions of the War of 1812 - social, diplomatic, military, and political - which places the war's origins and conduct in transatlantic perspective. The events of 1812-1815 were shaped by the larger crisis of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. In synthesizing and reinterpreting scholarship on the war, Professor J. C. A. Stagg focuses on the war as a continental event, highlighting its centrality to Canadian nationalism and state development. The book introduces the war to students and general readers, concluding that it resulted in many ways from an emerging nation-state trying to contend with the effects of rival European nationalisms, both in Europe itself and in the Atlantic world.

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Customer Reviews

The title and promotional reviews led me to expect more than I found in this short essay by J.C.A. Stagg. Phrases like a "judicious general overview" and statements like, "he (the author) has been able to condense his immense expertise into such a readable and insightful book" had let me to anticipate an exciting read. It was not to be found. The fact that J.C.A. Stagg is said to be James Madison's official biographer also created anticipation. The book was not bad. It was just disappointing. To start with, it appears it was designed visually to save cost and money. The style of writing and organizing does not lead to visual interest. There is an introduction so long it should have been a separate chapter, and 5 chapters, titled, simply, War, 1812, 1813, 1814 and Peace. Sections within each chapter are not titled with a clue to the coming content, but simply, I, II, III, IV,

V, VI, etc. The plainness of the print distracts from the interest, at least for this reader. I will not use the word "boring". It certainly was NOT boring, but even in this short 198 page presentation, I found myself in a hurry for the story to get more interesting. I would use the word "dry". The book is replete with interesting information which I did not know, as well as excellent analyses, and a very refreshing lack of severity toward American commanders and military. I just finished reading another 1812 history, titled "The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels & Indian Allies" by Alan Taylor. Mr. Taylor gave a rather harsh analysis of American "know-how" and execution. Stagg presented the same basic information in a more understanding manner that did not overly castigate soldiers who were trying to serve their country, but merely bereft of understanding and skill. The truth probably rests somewhere in the middle. In fact, America was indeed very fortunate to "win" the war and retain our independence. That is, if you could call what we did as "winning". It is more appropriate to say that the British "lost" the war by running out of the will to continue. (This is my own opinion based on what I have read.) One thing I did learn from Mr. Stagg: It really does matter who tells the story. Same story, same facts, much of the same interpretation, but a different and kinder impression comes from Stagg. Also, there is a great map section in the front of the book. I liked the book. It seemed dry. But the author does know his subject and I know and understand more than I did when I picked it up. Four stars: one off for dryness and style.

The War of 1812 is remembered by Americans on a curious level. On the one hand it created some of our most memorable national imagery --- Francis Scott Key writing the national anthem while held prisoner on a British warship in Baltimore harbor; Andrew Jackson at New Orleans shouting "elevate them guns a little lower" while blasting the King's Army with his own makeshift army of militiamen and pirates; of Commodore Stephen Decatur shouting "I have not yet begun to fight" after the British blew his own ship out of the water; and of Oliver Hazard Perry writing of the great victory on Lake Erie: "We have met the enemy and they are ours!" There is also the less happy memory of Dolly Madison scurrying out of the White House with a portrait of George Washington just before the British set fire to the place. These immortal snapshots aside, the details of the war haven't remained prominent in the national consciousness. That may be because the conduct of the war was so uneven. It was characterized by some of the most heroic military actions in our history but also by some of the most humiliating episodes of incompetence and dereliction of duty. This was true of the British and Canadian side as well. The war wasn't won militarily by anybody, but all parties gained by the improvement in Anglo-American relations that followed it. The United States

was later destined to fight its most costly war with itself in 1861 through 1865. The British were later destined to fight wars within their own Empire. But the USA and Great Britain never again fired so much as a single shot across the thousands-miles border separating their immense territories in North America. The war thus established the legitimacy of the USA in the eyes of Great Britain and of Canada in the eyes of the Americans. One can imagine what might have happened if it hadn't ended that way --- perhaps a vengeance-minded United States perpetually dedicated to expelling the British from Canada, and a vengeful Great Britain perpetually dedicated to diminishing the United States, perhaps by intervening on the side of the Confederacy later on. Historians have focused much more on the causes of the war than its outcome. For example, did the United States go to war because it was an aggressive expansionist power bent on expelling the British from Canada; because it rightly feared that British agents in Canada were inciting the Indians on the frontier to murder Americans; or because the British scoffed at American rights to transit the high seas by kidnapping our sailors and impressing them into British service and by ordering our ships to stay out of European ports unless prior approval was obtained from Britain? The short conventional answer is "All of the above." Author J.C.A. Stagg's thesis is that the correct answer should be "there's more to it than that." In fact he goes out on a limb by proposing to "organize a NEW history of the War of 1812." That's a tall order for a 200-year-old war. Stagg explains it thus:=====In that sense, the War of 1812 was fought not so much for "free trade and sailors' rights" or for territory and empire, as many historians have supposed, but more for a scrap of paper that by the end of 1814 had failed to materialize. What follows is an explanation for why the United States never got the treaty it wanted.=====However Stagg appears to obscure this premise in the concluding chapter on the negotiating of peace:=====Attempts to end the War of 1812 began at its outset and continued intermittently throughout its duration. The first occurred between June and September 1812. Within a week of the declaration, Monroe (Madison's Secretary of State) had communicated to the American chargé d'affaires in London, Jonathan Russell, the terms for peace, principally that Great Britain repeal the Orders in Council and cease the practice of impressment.=====In the rest of the book Stagg undermines his concluding statement that Madison was prepared to make peace on the specific objectives of Great Britain renouncing the Orders in Council and impressment of American sailors. Stagg asserts that Madison instigated and prolonged the war because he wanted the British to sign a FORMAL TREATY broadly agreeing NEVER AGAIN to interfere with America's commercial relations with other nations, in particular with nations like France that were prone to going to war with the British. It is difficult to

imagine that the British would ever sign such a treaty recognizing any country's right to conduct unrestricted trade with Britain's mortal enemies in continental Europe during time of war. Blockading enemies in continental Europe was after all the lynchpin of Britain's military strategy. Even a diplomatic neophyte like Mr. Madison must have known that such a treaty was unobtainable. If he didn't know it before declaring war, the British informed him immediately after the war commenced that they would not sign such a treaty, but that they were nevertheless prepared to suspend, and in fact HAD ALREADY SUSPENDED the obnoxious "Orders in Council" that had directed British warships to seize American cargo vessels bound for Europe and confiscate their cargoes. So why did Madison continue the war beyond that point? The conventionally accepted reasons that the British failure to renounce impressment (i.e. kidnapping American citizens on the high seas), British encouragement of Indian warfare against American settlers on the frontier, the American desire to stake a claim to Canada, the British desire to pick up weakly-held American territory on the Gulf Coast, plus the momentum of the war itself and the general desire of each belligerent to "teach a lesson" to the other, are what kept it going for two more years. Perhaps the author, a James Madison scholar, is viewing the war through too narrow of a historical window. Madison didn't start the war entirely by himself. The popular outcry against the British originated from broad segments of the American people and made its way to Congress and then to Madison. The people were aroused against the British for long-established reasons. They could no longer tolerate British agents encouraging the Indians to kill frontier settlers or their insult to national sovereignty by treating Americans on the high seas as if they were British subjects who must adhere to British laws. Madison's desire for a commercial treaty would have been incidental to the primary incitements to war. The book therefore doesn't live up to its promise of writing a "new" history of the war. However it does provide a lively account of some of the war's lesser-known subplots:*

President James Madison was perhaps one of the least diplomatic-grounded Presidents we have ever had. Although he wasn't exclusively responsible for instigating the war as this book implies, he seems to have done little to avoid it. One can just imagine British statesmen rolling their eyes at Madison's long-winded rants against them during the years leading up to the war.* Then again, the British and French, DID make it nearly impossible for the fledgling United States to maintain peaceful relations with them. Both European powers regarded the United States government as a non-entity that they were either free to ignore altogether or to bribe and subvert to serve their own interests. The utter contempt of both nations for the United States and its government must have been palpable in the diplomatic air.* The "Democratic-Republican" Party founded by Jefferson and Madison HAD given the Europeans good reason to believe that the United States was a country in name only. Jefferson

and Madison had railed against the Federalists' ideas of fully funding the national government and maintaining its authority over the states. The War of 1812 turned the tables on them, and they "out-Federalized" the Federalists in expanding the authority of the national government in its command of the nation's finances, its military, and its authority over the states.* It contains an excellent tactical view of the war, including its important but now-forgotten battles. The military overview is exactly the right depth, serious enough for scholarship, but not overdone in discussion of trivia. There is a good discussion of the "war within the war" when American commanders out on the frontier like Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison brought their militiamen to bear against the federations of Indian "nations" who had waged bloody warfare against American settlers. Although the book fails to support its premise that President Madison orchestrated the war for the calculated purpose of obtaining a grandiose commercial treaty from the British, it does thoroughly discuss the political, military, and diplomatic dimensions of the war. It doesn't provide any "new history" but tells the "old" history in an interesting and comprehensive way!btw. Instead of rehashing the causes of the war, it might be more interesting to see a book fully explaining its outcome. The standard "Both sides agreed to return to the status quo antebellum and none of the issues instigating the war were addressed" is the aspect of the war that seems incomplete. The war actually settled quite a lot of issues, judging by the peace in North America that has prevailed since then.

This is a short, introduction to the nuts and bolts of the War of 1812. For anyone who is truly interested in the subject (and that is where I fall) there are plenty of other options, but you just want a cliff-notes summary (just the facts, and not much argument of color) this is the book for you.

I learned a lot from this history. The writer points out that all most people know about the War of 1812 was the burning of Washington (and Dolly Madison saving the portrait of George Washington from the President's House) and the Battle of New Orleans starring Andrew Jackson. He is right; that is all I knew before I read this book. This history leads the reader through the difficulty of raising and keeping an army, the disunity among the states, the attempts to invade Canada, the naval battles on Lake Champlain and the Great Lakes, the incompetence of some US military men, the influence of Napoleon, the desire of Russia to mediate a peace, President Madison's constant efforts to get the congress to take action, etc. (Did you know that the US lost Detroit to the British during this war?) This is a well written book that is full of information.

Rather boring and stale in writing style, but yet it is a useful presentation about the War of 1812 that is thorough and seems based on facts. Strange how this bicentennial time of the War of 1812 receives so little attention.

This book is an excellent advanced overview of the war. It covers the political, financial, and military aspects at the highest level...the Madison administration. The strategic thinking of Great Britain and France are covered too. My only gripe is the author's more than occasional complex presentation of straightforward concepts.

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