

International Journal of Naval History

December 2005

Volume 4 Number 3

A British Eyewitness at the Battle of New Orleans: The Memoir of Royal Navy Admiral Robert Aitchison, 1808-1827. Edited by Gene A. Smith. New Orleans: The Historical New Orleans Collection, 2004. Pp. ix; 150.

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Royal Navy Admiral Robert Aitchison's memoirs span roughly twenty years. Penned in the late 1850s, they briskly describes the life of a young naval officer sailing the English Channel, serving on French blockade duty in the Mediterranean, chasing American privateers along the New England coast, the Battles of New Orleans and Algiers, and then that of a seasoned officer on the North American station. Born in 1795 and surviving until 1861, Aitchison secured a first-class naval volunteer appointment at age thirteen in 1808, passed his lieutenant's examination just days after the Battle of New Orleans, was promoted to commander in 1819, to captain in 1827, and then spent the rest of his career ashore on half-pay until his retirement in 1849. He was promoted to flag rank in 1854.

In an address delivered to a Civil War gathering shortly before his death, Douglas Southall Freeman advised caution regarding eyewitness accounts written more than twenty years after the war---not only because memories grow foggy with age, but also because the witness "has told his tale over and over again . . . until it becomes exceedingly difficult to ascertain the fabric of fact that underlies the embroidery of fancy." We do not have to worry about Aitchison, for as he comments: "All that I wish is, to acquaint my children, what part I acted in these juvenile days."

While Aitchison spent most of his career in the "Great Slump," the long period of Royal Navy demobilization following the wars with France and the United States, his

early career was not without episode and excitement. In December 1814 and January 1815, he observed the preparations for and subsequent British debacle on the plains of Chalmette, which becomes the highlight of the memoir. Although he remained behind and did not participate in the attack on the American naval force on Lake Borgne, to the disappointment of this reviewer, he did secure command of the gig carrying the admiral's "valet and shoe brushes," which allowed him to venture to the front. But again to this reviewer's dismay, he comments: "I have no business to attempt to describe what the army did, and I possibly would make many mistakes."

What the memoir lacks in detail, it makes up for in color. His description of the British redoubts at Chalmette, whose breastworks were made of sugar, their subsequent destruction, and the retrieval of the guns, is but one instance. "The roads were muddy, and I remember to this day how wretchedly off I was about the shoes, which stuck in the mud every now & then, and I was so tired, I felt half inclined to leave my heavy great coat in the mud, but we stuck together and went on. The night was pitch black, and when we reached these guns, which we were to drag out of the mud, we found it an impossibility. The commander of the army, Sir Edward Packenham, came to us, tried all he could, sometimes with threats, other times warning, but it would not do, and finally a large working party, fresh & strong, had to do that which our party had not the strength to do."

Aitchison's style is a challenge, but editor Gene A. Smith uses a light hand. He provides a bounty of explanatory notes, which amplify the usefulness of Aitchison's recollections and supply considerable added material to what can be learned here. The book also includes nearly a dozen beautiful color maps and plates illustrating the campaign, most of which are from The Historic New Orleans Collection.



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