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Michael J. Crawford (ed.), *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History [Volume III 1814-1815: Chesapeake Bay, Northern Lakes, and Pacific Ocean]* (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 2002), cloth ISBN 0945274-47-5.

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“A further resource for influencing the conduct of European nations towards us,” wrote Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers* (No. 11), “would arise from the establishment of a federal navy.” Such a force could be used to upset the balance of power between especially England and France in the western hemisphere—until such time as the United States would clearly dominate. All this depended, however, on the “continuance of the Union under an efficient government”. The alternative he warned was “a state so insignificant our commerce would be prey to the wanton intermeddlings of all nations at war with each other, who, having nothing to fear from us, would with little scruple or remorse supply their wants by depredations on our property as often as it fell in their way...A nation, despicable by its weakness, forfeits even the privilege of being neutral.”

One score and four years later, the United States indeed found itself caught between these two great European powers at war, the middle ground of which was the Atlantic Ocean. The War of 1812, as such, was categorically a *naval* war, and by Hamilton’s own reasoning perhaps, brought about by the weakness of the national government as much as its navy. How welcome it is, therefore, to have available *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*-series (edited by Michael J. Crawford), and this third volume covering the final years of the conflict, 1814-1815, and operations on Chesapeake Bay,

the Northern Lakes, and the Pacific Ocean. For it was in August 1814 that British naval power achieved its greatest political triumph—and the United States its most humiliating defeat—when Rear-Admiral Sir George Cockburn made an unopposed landing 40 miles from Washington, D.C., which was soon in flames (along with the Navy Yard). Yet the following month also saw the repulse of British combined forces against Baltimore, and the inspiration behind Francis Scott Key’s “Star-Spangled Banner”.

An enduring point of contention in Anglo-American historiography, is who actually “won” the war? A striking feature of *The Naval War of 1812* is that it is based as much on British archival sources as American. “The National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax; the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; the National Maritime Museum of Greenwich, England; and the Public Record Office in London are repositories of large collections of naval documents that we frequently consult,” notes the editor. As the Old English would say, ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating.’ The facts speak for themselves, in other words; and this collection constitutes as much an international naval history as it is an American one.

Contrast this important publication with the 2004 Conway Maritime Press reprint of *Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812*, by William M. James (with a new introduction by Professor Andrew Lambert), an early Victorian lawyer-turned-historian obsessed with countering “the bombastic, patriotic and false version of the war put forward by American authors”, and who drifted a bit too far the other way. With such an impressive, detailed array of contemporary letters, reports, and journal entries—compiled from both sides of this “middle-ground” into an extremely well-organized, easily-accessible, though somewhat unwieldy volume—at his disposal, even William James would have found satisfaction with *The Naval War of 1812*. The events of 1814-1815, carefully documented here, particularly demonstrated that the small, underpowered, and often ad-hoc American navy could win hard-fought battles like Lake Champlain (September 11, 1814), and lose them, as with the loss of U.S.S. *Essex* (March 21, 1814), with equal “courage, honor, and commitment that are at the core values of the American naval

service”, according to the Foreword by William S. Dudley, the Director of Naval History at the Naval Historical Center. Or, as Lambert notes in his recent *War at Sea in the Age of Sail 1650-1850* (London: Cassell, 2000): “After 1812 the British took America seriously as a naval power, an honour they accorded to very few nations.”

This was part of the equation never considered by Hamilton, in his thirst to prove the inherent, potential greatness of America to overbearing Europe—or to Admiral Cockburn, who wrote to his superior, Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, how Americans “now...begin to feel the Inconvenience of being kept to this kind of Work and the pressure & Privations occasioned by the War daily increasing, their patriotic Ardor has pretty generally vanished”; that victory at sea—and respect at the negotiating table—carried a moral premium difficult to calculate and impossible to predict. Within *The Naval War of 1812*’s hefty 800+ pages lies the secret recipe, found amidst many, many enjoyable reading hours.



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