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David Curtis Skaggs, *Thomas Macdonough: Master of Command in the Early U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2003). 257 pp. \$36.95.

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On September 11, 1814, the American squadron on Lake Champlain captured the rival British squadron and Commodore Thomas Macdonough of the United States Navy earned a place in history as the man who turned back a British invasion force. On the basis of this victory, Theodore Roosevelt judged that “down to the time of the Civil War [Macdonough] is the greatest figure in our naval history.”<sup>[1]</sup> Despite Macdonough’s national significance, David Curtis Skaggs’s new study is the first book-length scholarly biography of the commodore. The absence of any major collection of Macdonough’s personal papers may have discouraged potential biographers, but Skaggs triumphs over this handicap, producing a finely drawn portrait of officer and man.

Recently retired from teaching at Bowling Green State University, David Skaggs is a specialist in the military and naval history of colonial and early national North America, with a respectable and respected list of publications to his credit. Skaggs puts his expertise to good use, for, although the facts of Macdonough’s naval career are well known, this new biography makes an original contribution to our understanding of that career through the application of theory. The author analyzes Macdonough’s development and performance as an officer by examining them through the characteristics of command discussed in studies of leadership. As a result, the book makes useful supplemental reading for courses on leadership and can be read with benefit by active naval officers. Readers will find here cogent applications of such concepts as *interior lines*, *fleet in being*, *unity of command*, and *unit cohesion*, which could serve as

practical examples in lectures on naval history, strategy, tactics, and logistics. Skaggs also employs ideas of Carl von Clausewitz, John Keegan, and Christopher McKee to advantage.

The book's most closely reasoned and most original chapters are three and four, which discuss Macdonough's command on Lake Champlain and his preparations for defeating the British squadron. Skaggs masterfully explains the overall strategic situation, gives close consideration to the logistical requirements the commodore faced, and pays unusual attention to Macdonough's performance as an administrator.

The Battle of Plattsburgh Bay was the high point of Macdonough's career and is the centerpiece of this biography. Skaggs lays out a persuasive explanation for the battle's outcome. In their testimony in the courts-martial of the British naval officers who survived the battle, the naval officers attributed their defeat to the British army. The army commander, Sir George Prevost, they asserted, pressed the navy to go into battle before the ships were ready and the crews trained. The British naval commander, George Downie, consented to attack under conditions that nullified the advantage of his superiority in long guns only because he believed the British army would at the same time initiate its assault on the American position on shore, which the army did not do. The British army had no opportunity to respond to the navy's criticisms. Prevost demanded a court-martial to clear his name but died ten days before it was scheduled to sit.

Skaggs comes to the defense of the British army, laying the blame for the British naval defeat in Plattsburgh Bay squarely on the British navy. He concludes that a land action would have had no effect on the naval engagement. First, there was no guarantee that the British army would have captured the forts. Second, despite what Alfred T. Mahan thought, <sup>[2]</sup> neither the British nor the American land artillery had the range needed to molest Macdonough's fleet. Skaggs's verdict is that the British lost on Lake Champlain because the Royal Navy for too long gave the lake too little attention. The slowness with

which the flagship, *Confiance*, was completed allowed Macdonough to complete the brig *Eagle* in time for the battle. *Confiance*'s poor readiness for combat, the assembling of a crew too late to be trained or to develop unit cohesion, and the appointment at the eleventh hour of a commander unacquainted with his officers all contributed to the result of the naval engagement. For all of these failings the navy was responsible, and under such conditions it was simple hubris for the Royal Navy to expect victory.

Biographers of United States naval officers have recently begun to give the role that religion played in their subjects' lives the serious consideration it deserves.<sup>[3]</sup> Like the general population of the time, naval officers varied in degree of devotion to religion. Thomas Macdonough was one who enjoyed a reputation for genuine piety, and, considering several specific episodes in Macdonough's life, Skaggs concludes that this reputation was deserved. Skaggs speculates that Macdonough's piety may have had an effect on his career, particularly in exacerbating the dispute with Charles Stewart that led to Macdonough's relief from his command in the Mediterranean. Stewart probably viewed Macdonough as a self-righteous prig, and Macdonough's discouraging of subordinates from gambling rubbed Stewart, an inveterate gambler, the wrong way.

Among Macdonough's few character flaws that Skaggs finds is his failure to give adequate recognition to subordinates who were not under his direct observation. Skaggs commits a similar failing when he gives Macdonough all the credit for transferring, at the climax of the Battle of Plattsburgh, a kedge anchor from the port quarter to the starboard quarter that allowed the completion of the winding of *Saratoga* to bring the undamaged port guns to bear. Although Macdonough gave the order, the idea appears to have been Sailing Master Philip Brum's.<sup>[4]</sup>

Despite its usefulness to scholars, the work is accessible to the general reader. The text is well written and generally a pleasure to read. Occasional technical problems indicate inadequate proofreading and poor copyediting. In the table of British naval strength at the Battle of Plattsburgh Bay, the gunboat *Wellington* is listed twice (page 120); the prayer

from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* that Macdonough offered before the battle omits several words so that a clause in it makes little sense (page 127),<sup>[5]</sup> the citation to the “famous fighting gamecock,” (page 222, note 27) is out of place, since the gamecock is mentioned elsewhere in the text and not in the paragraph to which the citation is attached. These, as well as several incorrectly used words and grammatical sins, are discrepancies that a copyeditor should have noticed. Although the author has final responsibility, a publisher owes an author better service than this.

If the reader is searching for a hero worthy of emulation, Skaggs’s Macdonough is a good candidate. The commodore inspired loyalty and bravery in his officers and men and worked cooperatively with army commanders. He was loyal to family, flag, and God, temperate in habits, an able administrator, expert in his professions of sailor and warrior, and in battle levelheaded and courageous.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York, 1882; reprint ed., Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987), p. 356.

<sup>[2]</sup> Alfred T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1905; reprint ed., New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 2: 267-70.

<sup>[3]</sup> For example, Gene A. Smith, *Thomas ap Catesby Jones: Commodore of Manifest Destiny* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2000).

<sup>[4]</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America*, 2 vols. in one (Paris, 1839; reprint ed., Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Literature House, 1970), 2: 317.

[5] The prayer, in part, as given by Skaggs reads: “O let not thy poor servants begging mercy, and imploring thy help, and that thou wouldest be a defence unto us against the face of the enemy.” The correct quotation is: “O let not our sins now cry against us for vengeance; but hear us thy poor servants begging mercy, and imploring thy help, and that thou wouldest be a defence unto us against the face of the enemy.”



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