

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Declaring Victory: Two Books, Two Different Victors of the War of 1812

**Thomas Malcomson**

Brian Arthur. *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, [www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com), 2011. xxiii + 328 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$123.75, hardback; ISBN 978-1-84383-665-0. (Distributed in Canada by Scholarly Book Services, [www.sbookscan.com](http://www.sbookscan.com))

George C. Daughan. *1812: The Navy's War*. New York: Basic Books, [www.basicbooks.com](http://www.basicbooks.com), 2011. xxix + 491 pp. illustrations, maps, notes, select bibliography, index. CDN \$37.50, hardback; ISBN 978-0-465-02046-1 (paper); ISBN 978-0-465-02808-5 (e-book).

With the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War of 1812 upon us, there is no shortage of historical retellings and re-assessments of the war, the belligerents, the battles, the military personalities, both naval and political leaders, and the outcome. The two books reviewed below weigh into this discussion, each claiming victory for a different side. Brian Arthur's title clearly announces his belief that the British won the War of 1812 as a result of their blockade of the American east coast. George C. Daughan's title is less obvious, subtly suggesting that it was the American Navy's war. On the inside flap of the dust jacket, we are informed that the "tiny, battle-tested team of American commanders... played a key role in winning the conflict that cemented America's newly won independence." Though both books examine the role of the two navies in the war, they focus on very disparate elements of the naval campaigns. These books are very different in terms of target audience, academic language, and quality of research.

Brian Arthur's *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815* is largely an economic analysis of the impact of the British blockade on the American economy, and in particular, how it reduced the revenue the United States government needed to fight the war. The author believes that the effect of the blockade has been "seriously underestimated" by historians. One example is Wade Dudley whose book, *Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815* (Naval Institute Press, 2003) suggests that the blockade was ineffective and another demonstration of the Royal Navy's failure during the war. By the end of the book, Arthur has demolished Dudley's position (and all who agree with him).

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The first five chapters of the book describe the naval situation at the outset of the war, preliminary British efforts at limited blockade, and the final push to blockade all American ports in mid-1814. The usual story unfolds of an unprepared British Navy on the North American Station being reshaped by the replacement of Vice-Admiral Sawyer with Admiral Sir John B. Warren. Warren's multiple orders to convoy British merchant ships; stop American naval vessels from going to sea and, once there, hunt them; attack American merchant shipping; and finally, to see if the Americans would consider an armistice, all conspired against the effectiveness of the blockade of American ports. The limited number of vessels at his disposal to meet these demands also impeded his potential success. Warren was replaced in April 1814 by Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, who had a much clearer agenda, more ships and a mandate to close all American ports to trade.

Arthur notes the Admiralty's dissatisfaction with Warren's command (an opinion shared by many historians), but he also defends Warren, suggesting that he was more successful than has previously been acknowledged. He attributes the final "total" blockade of America by Cochrane to Warren's initial efforts. The two chapters dealing with Warren's performance (chapters 4 and 6) will go far to rehabilitate the admiral's reputation. Arthur blames Warren's apparent hesitation in pushing the blockade harder in the early going on the British Government's indecisive instructions. Warren did manage to send convoys safely back to Britain; limited by his resources and the weather, he did blockade the United States Navy for lengthy periods of time; and he did press the Americans with raids in the Chesapeake Bay. Cochrane, who usually receives more praise than Warren in accounts of the war, is criticised by Arthur for not merely blockading New Orleans and exerting more economic pressure on the United States rather than engaging in "second unsuccessful British assault on a land target" (p.194). Cochrane's most significant act, according to Arthur, was blockading Boston.

While Arthur uses economic data throughout the book to support his position that the British blockade was effective against the United States, it is in chapters 6 and 7 that the book presents the strongest economic arguments. Anyone familiar with economic history will be at home in the incredibly academically-dense description of the ways and means of America's defeat on the economic front. Briefly put, Americans relied on the income from taxes on imports and exports, rather than a more broadly based tax system that could raise money on internal economic activity. Britain's ability to protect its foreign trade enabled it to retain tax income and raise loans to support the war effort. By the same token, the American government was crippled by the loss of import and export duties, due in part to their own trade embargo in the early months of the war and later, to the firm grip of the British blockade. As 1815 loomed, the American government was on the verge of bankruptcy. The British blockade, in Arthur's analysis, was essential in creating the dim outlook for 1815 that pressured the Americans to seek peace with Britain. In assessing the cost of the war to the two sides, Arthur acknowledges that the United States can claim more individual victories over British naval vessels, but in terms of the proportion of vessels captured or destroyed, the U.S. Navy experienced the greater loss. The same equation applies to the merchant fleets of the two belligerents, with Britain again coming out ahead of the United States. Arthur employs 35 tables of

economic data on both American and British trade and tax revenues and expenditures (contained in a separate appendix) to support his argument. His economic data is extremely convincing.

Arthur focuses almost entirely on the east coast blockade, its impact on the merchant shipping of both countries, and its effect on government coffers. He informs the reader that he has purposefully omitted any discussion of the use of privateers by either side, the effect of the land war on the economic picture or the final outcome, and all activity on the Great Lakes. He generally keeps his promise with the first two, but cannot resist referring to the war on the inland seas. Unfortunately, his discussion of the war on the Great Lakes is flawed by his failure to get the facts straight. He claims the American victory on Lake Erie occurred in September 1814 (p. xxiii) rather than the correct year of 1813. He pegs the British loss at seven ships at the Battle of Lake Erie, with HMS *Detroit* still being built at the time of the engagement (p.198), when, in fact, the *Detroit* served as Barclay's flagship in the battle and only six vessels were taken by the Americans. He states that five British vessels were taken on Lake Champlain (p.198) when it was four. The inclusion of British and American losses on the Lakes in his overall comparison of British and American costs for the war seems inappropriate since he excluded any real discussion of the theatre in his economic analysis. Part of his cost analysis of American losses refers to U. S. naval vessels lost during the war in Table 2 (p.96), including captures on the Great Lakes. The table is incomplete, however, failing to include the capture of the US naval schooners *Somers* and *Ohio* (the latter of which is noted) in August 1814 and the capture of the US schooners *Julia* and *Growler* in August 1813 on Lake Ontario and the USS *Eagle* and another US sloop *Growler* on Lake Champlain in June 1813.

George Daughan has produced a book which sings the praises of the American Navy during the War of 1812 and condemns the president, most of his cabinet and the generals who led the American army up to mid-1814 for American failures during the war. While the subtitle is *The Navy's War*, Daughan's 34 chapters cover more than the navy. He touches on the land battles against Upper Canada in the northern border area, raids in the Chesapeake, with separate chapters on Washington and Baltimore, and the post-treaty attack at New Orleans. His description of the major land battles of the war demonstrate American courage blunted by incompetent commanding officers when battles are lost, and due to courage and great leadership when battles are won. For the battles of Baltimore and New Orleans, he adds a description of the American naval forces present at each and their essential role in securing the victory. He spends time on the causes of the war, the Hartford Convention and the peace negotiations at Ghent. Daughan also includes a discussion of the events in Europe between Britain's allies and Napoleon for 1811 through to 1814, which seems, at times, to extend past the point of relevance.

The ten chapters that deal with the navy run through the frigate victories of the early war period, the American victories in the brig class of encounters later in the war, and the victories by Commodores Perry and Macdonough on Lakes Erie and Champlain respectively. The first victory on the oceans for the American navy came with USS

*Essex's* brisk defeat of HMS *Alert*. Daughan describes the British captain as having the same daring as Sir Francis Drake, but after one broadside from the *Essex*, which caused the British gunners to run from their stations, he surrendered with very un-Drake-like haste. He suggests that this victory revealed the error of both American and British leaders in assuming the United States Navy was no match for the Royal Navy. It sets the tone of Daughan's central thesis, that U.S. Navy officers were responsible for the victories at sea, and thereby, responsible for America's claim to have won the war. This message is repeated with the captures of HMS *Guerriere*, *Macedonian* and *Java*. In each victory, the American officers and crew out-think and out-fight the veteran British officers and their discontented crews. The U.S. Navy's successes stand in stark contrast to the army's failures.

Daughan's account of the battle between HMS *Shannon* and the U.S. Frigate *Chesapeake* suggests that Captain Broke mismanaged the *Shannon* and allowed Lawrence to take the weather gauge, offering him the advantage of raking the British vessel. Lawrence declined in "a misguided act of chivalry" (p.192). As the two ships touched, it was the Americans who gathered to board first, with the British only boarding the *Chesapeake* in response. He attributes the loss of the *Chesapeake* to two things, Lawrence's chivalrous act and bad luck. Apparently, Broke's intense training of his seasoned crew had nothing to do with the outcome. Daughan describes Broke's near-fatal wound during the fight aboard the *Chesapeake* but claims he continued to hold command until the ship surrendered. Given the nature of the massive head wound Broke sustained, this would have been impossible.

Daughan spends more time on the Great Lakes theatre than Arthur. He refers incorrectly to Sir James Lucas Yeo, commodore of the British establishment on the Great Lakes, as Admiral Yeo throughout the book (first on p.177, last on p.393), suggesting at one point he held an independent command, which he never did (p.258). The description of the Battle of Lake Erie is a brief two pages in which the author compares the two squadrons as equals with a potential advantage of long guns to the British. He claims the victory was due to Perry's courage and luck, "in spite of Elliott's treachery" (p.216) referring to the controversy over the slowness of Perry's second-in-command to enter battle. Daughan says little, however, about the challenges that faced the British before and during the engagement.

Throughout the book there are numerous statements about how awful service in the Royal Navy was. It starts early with a remark about the "bestial punishment code" (p.18) in British ships, with no comparison to American use of corporal punishment. Although it is not stated, Daughan may have used Samuel Leech's writing as his source, but Leech clearly wrote against corporal punishment and for American audiences. Daughan suggests that due to the number of shipwrecks and ships lost in battle, "impressment was thus akin to a death sentence" (p.18), a view few modern naval historians of the era would hold. His comment on Lieutenant David Hope of HMS *Macedonian* as "...a savage, sadistic disciplinarian — who urged fighting to the death" (p.133) may be true, but the statement requires a reference source which is not provided. If urging on the crew to fight to the death is a negative element, it begs a comparison with

Captain Lawrence's command of "Don't give up the ship," which conveys the same message. Daughan's suggestion that the Indians hoped "that the British, as devious and unreliable as they were, would win..." (p.87) serves to denigrate both groups. While there are many other excessively negative remarks about the British, the last I'll note is Daughan's comment on the British practice of forcing American prisoners of war into its navy, suggesting the count might be "impossible to say, but it was probably a significant number" (p.182). Without noting a source as evidence, this line, like the others, is more indicative of bias against one side than a grappling with the hard facts of the past.

George Daughan constantly uses modern naval and warfare terms throughout his text, most commonly "skipper" instead of captain or commander (pp. 280, 281, 313), adding a sense of lax familiarity between the crew and captain that would not have existed. He refers to "cruisers of the Provincial Marine patrol[ing]" Lake Erie (p.93) which has a modern meaning neither congruent with the nature of the 1812 vessels, nor the competence of the Provincial Marine. His description of American soldiers landing "on the beach" (p.110) at Queenston Heights calls up an image of soldiers arriving at a Pacific island rather than on a thin strip of shattered shale on the river's edge, at the foot of a 60-metre high escarpment.

Daughan's chapter on the blockade is a mere five and a half pages in which he describes the American desire to get to sea and subsequently sending the crews who couldn't to the Great Lakes. The one passage of note is his account of Captain Thomas Brown, of HMS *Loire* (38), and Daughan's interpretation of Brown's refusal to fight the American frigate *President* in 1814 as a sign of the British respect of the American Navy (p.279). He fails to mention that Brown, along with all British frigate captains, had been ordered not to fight single-ship actions. Daughan suggests, "The change in British attitudes would serve the U.S. Navy and the country well in the future" (p.276). When that future would be he does not say. As opposed to Arthur, Daughan suggests that the blockade was of relatively minimal consequence.

In his conclusion, Daughan suggests that American naval victories forced the British government to change their stance towards the United States, to see it as a force to be reckoned with, better regarded as an ally than an enemy. He also claims that the Battle of New Orleans, although fought after the Treaty of Ghent was signed, shaped the "peace that followed" (p.392). Without saying the word "won," Daughan states that "as a result of military and political successes achieved during and immediately after the war (he refers to a short chapter on the war against Algeria), America proved that its republican form of government could deal with a crisis and deal with it successfully..." (pp. 416-417). With reference to the War of Independence, he holds that the War of 1812 solidified the nation, helped establish a standing army and navy, brought proper recognition from Britain, and thus, secured the country's independence.

Both authors include maps within their books. Arthur offers an overview map of the North American and West Indies Station and another of the Chesapeake Bay and Delaware River area. Daughan's 14 maps are placed after the table of contents and range from the east coast of the United States to an overview and several detail maps of Upper Canada, the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays, and even two maps of Northern Europe and

one of the Mediterranean. All maps in both books are simple outline maps featuring place names mentioned in the text. They provide readers with a sense of location for the various events covered by the authors. Each book contains a limited number of black and white illustrations, with Arthur's text having portraits of a few of the central figures, placed in the centre of the book while Daughan has a dozen images, mainly of ship actions, spread throughout his book. Arthur's illustrations have been seen many times before while Daughan shares a few new views with his readers.

Bryan Arthur has made use of a vast range of primary sources, both economic and official, as well as personal papers and secondary sources from which he weaves the evidence into a solid body of proof for his position. George Daughan uses published records and secondary sources to retell stories others have told before, although his excellent word-smithing skills rejuvenate old stories. Arthur's endnotes and bibliography are lengthy and full with the exception of some archival material being cited by fonds reference only (i.e. ADM 1/933), without a title or descriptive line. Daughan provides extensive endnotes and a selected bibliography. The endnotes are arranged by page location and cited by the first few words of the point or quote, not the most user-friendly system. His bibliography contains a number of errors including crediting N. A. M. Rodger with writing N. Rogers' 2007 book on press gangs (p. 472), an ironic error.

The two authors have presented us with a conundrum; who is correct about which side won? Omitting the land war, the use of privateers and a more in-depth look at what took place on the Great Lakes, Arthur's conclusion is ultimately limited to Britain's success with the blockade rather than the entire conflict. Daughan's perspective, that the officers and crews of the United States Navy won the war for America, is only applicable to the outcome of a few single-ship engagements on the ocean and squadron actions on the lakes. While significant events in their own right, they do not equate to winning the war. Arthur does not discuss aboriginal involvement in the war and or their experience afterwards, while Daughan just touches on the subject. A work which addressed the whole war in detail would be necessary to truly judge who won or lost, or which side was best able to hold the status quo (a daunting task yet to be undertaken by any writer).

These two books will appeal to very different audiences. Arthur's is a deftly researched academic analysis of the British blockade of the east coast of America during the war, supported by statistics that will not appeal to the general reader. Daughan's work is written for that general audience with a clear waving of the American flag. The dissatisfying reality for this reviewer is that although Bryan Arthur has produced the better academic work, the easier access to George Daughan's prose will make his book more appealing to the lay reader, who will not be aware of his inaccuracies. The consolation is that Arthur's work will become the standard against which all other economic assessments of the British blockade during the War of 1812 will have to be compared.