

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Malcomson. *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006. lxiii + 701 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-5499-4.

Reviewed by Richard V. Barbuto (Department of Military History, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College)

Published on H-War (July, 2006)

Free Trade and Sailors' Rights: All You Ever Wanted to Know

This dictionary is an essential scholarly reference of the War of 1812. As such, it joins David and Jeanne Heidler's *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812* (1997) and John C. Fredriksen's *War of 1812 Eyewitness Accounts* (1997) as indispensable resources.

Robert Malcomson has produced a comprehensive and balanced treatment of the war in over fourteen hundred wide-ranging entries. The dictionary begins with a twelve-page chronology that starts with Britain's declaration of war on France in 1803 and ends with the final peace treaties between the Americans and the western tribes in the fall of 1815. Following the chronology, there is an engaging twenty-four page introduction laying out the causes of the conflict, describing various land and sea operations, sketching the course of peace negotiations, and addressing the war's outcome. Dictionary entries comprise the remainder of the volume.

The author of a dictionary decides what topics, personages, and events to include. Exclusion relegates the omitted to relative unimportance. Malcomson's selections, with few exceptions, are judicious. He has assembled as extensive a listing as the serious researcher or casual buff could want or need. People, from the prominent to the obscure, emerge in detailed biography. Malcomson addresses virtually every engagement, battle, and operation. Locations, tribal groupings, treaties, weapons, ships, legislation, and fortifications all find lively description. Malcomson's treatment of land and sea topics is balanced as is his treatment of British, Canadian, American, or native perspective.

By including unit histories for every regimental-size formation and for many smaller units as well, the author substantially increases the dictionary's usefulness. Malcomson provides the date and circumstance of formation, organization, battle record, and notable personages. Each battle entry includes an order of battle. *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812* may be the best single source of such detailed information for regular, volunteer, and militia units.

Malcomson goes beyond simple description in his entries. He analyzes many of his topics, providing the reader with a suggestion of their significance. In all, the author demonstrates an excellent grasp of strategic issues and possibilities. His extensive efforts at cross-referencing allow readers quickly to expand their enquiry into any topic. For example, the two-page entry for the Battle of Chippawa points readers to no less than forty-five related entries.

The dictionary is not without errors, but these are, for the most part, minor. For example, Edmund Pendleton Gaines is once referred to as Edward. The author includes George Izard with Jacob Brown and Winfield Scott as being influential in the development of the U.S. Army into the nineteenth century. Surely he meant Alexander Macomb instead of Izard. Macomb rose to command the Army well after Izard's resignation in 1815. One may justifiably question why the Creek War receives so little coverage. There are no entries for Fort Mims, Horseshoe Bend, Red Sticks, or William Weatherford. Why is the entry for James Lewis Basden longer than that of Zebu-

lon Pike or Edward Baynes? Other readers will find other quibbles, yet none should deter the serious scholar.

Malcomson concludes his dictionary with a particularly useful seventy-four page bibliographic essay and bibliography organized geographically and topically.

Readers can readily locate the best scholarship extant. Period maps and useful graphics further compliment this detailed work. Altogether, Malcomson has clearly produced a powerful research tool of enduring value. To others contemplating preparation of a dictionary of the War of 1812—it is no longer necessary.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Richard V. Barbuto. Review of Malcomson, Robert, *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12074>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.