

**The Battle of Lake Champlain: A 'Brilliant and Extraordinary Victory'**

by **John H. Schroeder**

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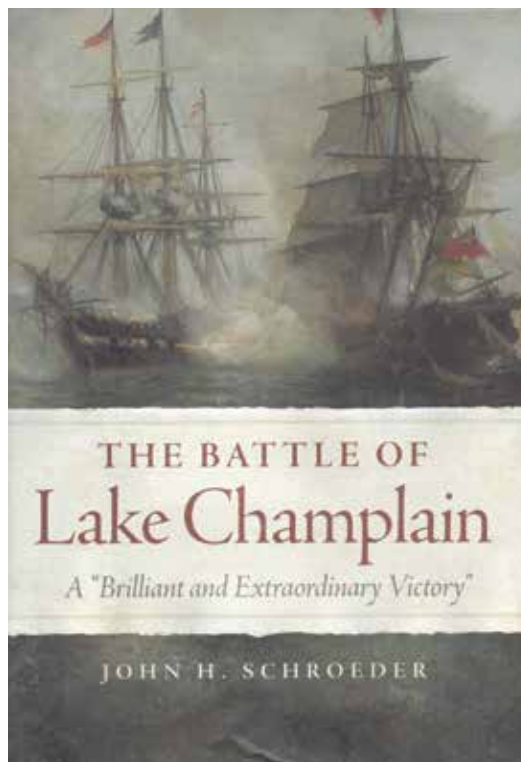
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Reviewed by

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In *The Battle of Lake Champlain*, American historian John Schroeder offers a balanced and well-written perspective of naval affairs on Lake Champlain in 1814. The author places the campaign in the broader context of the Anglo-American War of 1812, examines the reasons for the American victories at Plattsburgh and on Lake Champlain, and considers the subsequent diplomatic and political fallout in America and Britain. In 1812 and 1813, military and naval campaigns in the northern theatre—the provinces of Lower and Upper Canada and the adjacent American states—proved inconclusive, while the successes of American



at Île aux Noix, the naval station on the Richelieu River; their objective was to reduce potential strikes against Lower Canada by seizing Plattsburgh and securing control of Lake Champlain. Facing them were 4,500 well-trained American regulars and volunteers, and a naval force similar in size to that of the British.

warships and privateers on the ocean may have boosted American confidence, but had little effect on British naval or economic power. In 1814, the character of the war changed, when, after having spent two campaign seasons invading Canada, the United States now found itself “unprepared and vulnerable” (p. 23) to invasion, including an offensive against Plattsburgh using a portion of a traditional north-south invasion corridor.

Whereas the ‘Great Warpath,’ the military corridor between Ticonderoga and Montreal proved important in the Seven Years’ War and the War of American Independence, it remained a backwater in 1812 and 1813. In the summer of 1814, it witnessed the only major British offensive in the northern theatre as nearly 10,000 troops were assembled near Montréal, while a squadron of four warships and a flotilla of 12 gunboats were readied

British naval preparations were marred by several “highly questionable” (p. 57) decisions made by Commodore Sir James Yeo, the Commander in Chief on the Great Lakes. Yeo not only hoarded the stores that would have allowed the timely completion of the 37-gun frigate *Confiance* at Île aux Noix, for his own purposes, he also appointed Captain George Downie to replace Captain James Fisher as naval commander on the eve of the campaign. Meanwhile, the fortunes of the army appeared to increase when it was learned that most of the regulars had departed Plattsburgh to reinforce a spent division at American-occupied Fort Erie in the Niagara Peninsula.

Facing light resistance during the march to Plattsburgh, Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, the Captain General and Governor in Chief of British North America, and commander of the expedition, decided to postpone an immediate assault on Plattsburgh until Downie arrived on the lake. After expending considerable effort to complete his flagship, Downie signalled his readiness to engage the American squadron under Commodore Thomas Macdonough on 11 September 1814, concurrent with Prevost’s assault on the defences of Plattsburgh.

The balance that both squadrons shared in manpower (917 British versus 820 American) and weight of metal (1,864 tons for the 92 British, and 2,033 tons for the 86 American guns and caronades) (p. 73) ended with the *type* of ordnance they carried. The British enjoyed superiority in long guns, giving them a weight of 1,128 pounds against 759 pounds for the Americans. Furthermore, Downie and his subordinates were seasoned naval officers, whereas this would be Macdonough’s first battle. Leadership can have a profound effect on battle, and in this case, the “Americans were better prepared and had planned more carefully than the British” (p. 84).

Instead of giving Downie the benefit of a long range engagement on the open lake, Macdonough positioned his vessels in Cumberland Bay, where the closer quarters would allow him to employ all his guns. Surprisingly, Downie accepted battle under these conditions, and within a short time, enemy fire had killed him and pounded his ships into submission. Witnessing the defeat of Downie, Prevost cancelled the attack on Plattsburgh, and on the following day, he marched his troops back to Lower Canada.

The British could find little comfort in knowing that the damage to the American squadron and the few regulars left at Plattsburgh had spared Montréal from invasion. As the reality of the defeat on

Lake Champlain and Prevost’s withdrawal sank in, repercussions “surfaced unevenly” (p. 91) in America, Britain, Canada, and at Ghent, although the outcome at Plattsburgh did “not shorten the war” (p. 109).

The British and American governments “reacted similarly to the first reports” (p. 91) of the campaign. The American war effort received a much needed boost as Congress voted additional funds for troops and equipment, while Britain launched a new campaign in the Gulf of Mexico. The setbacks at Baltimore and Plattsburgh, and the subsequent misfortune at New Orleans, did not end the British presence on the Atlantic or Gulf Coasts of North America. British forces had occupied the Territory of Massachusetts, continued raiding the Atlantic coast, and maintained the naval blockade of the United States, while 37,000 British regular troops guarded the frontiers of British North America, and their naval squadron dominated the strategically important Lake Ontario.

The threat of renewed war in Europe proved crucial in ending the Anglo-American conflict. Aspirations for any land grab ended and a peace was sought quickly, as European interests reasserted their premiere position in British policy, a factor that influenced British decisions during the war more than events in North America did, and an element that this book ignores. One last casualty from the ruins of the Plattsburgh campaign was the governor of British North America.

A nasty campaign led by Sir James Yeo succeeded in having Prevost blamed for the defeat on Lake Champlain. In March 1815, Prevost was recalled to London, where he died before a hearing to clear charges the navy had brought against him could sit. Prevost’s reputation has suffered to this day.

*The Battle of Lake Champlain* is an unparalleled study of the Battle of Lake Champlain. Drawing upon American and British archival sources and more recent secondary works, the author has crafted a succinct and balanced narrative, thus making an important contribution to our understanding of the dramatic events in this theatre during the War of 1812.

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