

NICOLE EUSTACE, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2012), xvii + 315 pp.

ANDREW LAMBERT, *The Challenge: Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 538 pp.

PAUL GILJE, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 437 pp.

The traditional American narrative of the War of 1812 emphasizes that British maritime practices—mainly interferences with American neutral trade and the impressment of seamen from American merchant ships on the high seas—caused severe Anglo-American tensions in the early nineteenth century such that Republicans—in power in the United States since 1801—felt the need to declare war against the former mother country in 1812 in order to defend the nation's honor. In the following so called 'Second War of Independence,' the U.S. Navy was able to win some impressive naval battles against the hitherto undefeated Royal Navy, the traditional story continues, and thus made Great Britain acknowledge American sovereignty in the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. The War of 1812 produced military heroes such as James Lawrence, David Porter, Stephen Decatur, and Andrew Jackson and thus promoted American nationalism, such that the initially divisive war ushered in the so-called Era of Good Feelings, the classical American interpretation concludes.

On the occasion of the bicentennial of the conflict, three works appeared that fundamentally call the assumptions of this narrative into question. Nicole Eustace, Associate Professor of History at New York University, called the war "a grave American embarrassment" (31), in which diplomatically and militarily the United States achieved nothing and which was marked by disastrous military failures on the American side. Andrew Lambert, Professor of Naval History at King's College, London, found that "after a litany of defeats all along the Canadian border, the capture and destruction of Washington, bankruptcy and the loss of several warships, including the national flagship; the peace settlement had been a fortunate escape" for the American government (1-2). As both authors concur that America did not 'win' the War of 1812, they seek to understand—yet in different ways—why it

boosted American patriotism and why it has been publicly remembered as an American success story. Paul Gilje, Professor of United States History at the University of Oklahoma, in the third book under review in this article, by contrast, seems at first glance to keep up the traditional American narrative of the War of 1812 when emphasizing Britain's violations of American neutral rights and impressment on the high seas as the causes for America's declaration of war. Possibly without intending to do so, however, he also raises troubling questions about the legacy of the American Revolution when he implies that the assertion of the democratic principles that lie at the bottom of American identity and that were symbolized by free trade and sailors' rights allowed for no other alternative than to declare war against the former mother country. In this way, Gilje's monograph also, albeit indirectly, undermines the standard interpretation by finding the war's origins in Americans' democratic mentality rather than in British maritime practices.

Eustace tries to explain why the war became "a popular success" (xi) by analyzing it not as a "military" but as a "cultural event" (x). According to her, the United States went to war primarily to expand westwards and to drive Indians off their lands in the West. The displacement of the Native populations, moreover, was a goal that united white Americans of all stripes. Eustace analyzes how Republican war supporters portrayed Indians as ruthless savages that mercilessly butchered white children and abducted and raped white women and how Republicans thus felt justified to expel Indians from their lands or even to exterminate them. "The tale of the bloodthirsty savage bent on violating women and children in the pursuit of a population competition that bordered on genocide usefully projected U.S. goals and tactics onto the nation's enemies" (151). As their resistance was broken in the war and as they lost protection by the British who did not insist on taking their Indian allies' interests into account in the peace negotiations, Republicans felt that their most important war aim had been achieved.

In a fascinating chapter on the public interpretation of the Battle of New Orleans—fought in January 1815 after the so called 'Christmas Peace' of 1814 had already been concluded—Eustace exposes that Republicans falsely claimed that the British soldiers had allegedly been promised the women of New Orleans as

their reward if they won against the American forces. Republicans concluded that American victory in the Crescent City thus ensured the safety of Louisianan women. As a result, the War of 1812 could be depicted as a success, even though the original war aims—free trade and sailors' rights—had not even been mentioned in the Treaty of Ghent, because—it would appear—"American men had protected their women" (216). Moreover, Eustace argues that the claim that it was only through Jackson's victory at New Orleans that American women had been protected from sexual violence by British soldiers reinforced gender inequalities and contributed to the continuous denial of women's right to politically participate in the American nation: "Framing Jackson's victory at New Orleans as a strike against sexual assault helped men maintain the proposition that, even in the absence of any other economic or political rights, wives owed unquestioned allegiance to their husbands and their nation in return for simple protection from rape" (218).

According to Eustace, the major results of the War of 1812 therefore have little to do with the maritime disputes between the United States and its former mother country. Most importantly, U.S. troops had decisively beaten Indians in the Northwest and Southwest and thus opened the areas to white settlement, as the British chose to withdraw their demand for an independent Indian buffer state in the peace negotiations, preferring quick peace in North America after more than two decades of warfare in Europe against first Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France, thus effectively betraying their Indian allies: "The decision to do nothing at Ghent meant everything to the Indians who faced certain dispossession from that day forward" (227). The second important result of the War of 1812, Eustace argues, was of a domestic nature. As Republicans portrayed the war as a conflict between virtuous and brave American men and sexually depraved Indians and Britons, it contributed to the continued exclusion of women from full citizenship. As American men had protected them from assault, women were encouraged to marry soldiers who had defended their country and serve as 'reward' for their bravery. Moreover, after men had performed their military service to the country and opened the western land for settlement, women were expected to produce progeny for the emerging American nation and lay the foundation

for future territorial expansion and Indian removal. The overall consequence of Indian defeats and the assertion of American manhood was the strengthening of white American reproductive facilities, territorial expansion, and American nationalism and consequently Americans came to regard the War of 1812 as a great victory.

By turning away from Anglo-American relations and instead focusing on white American perceptions of Native Americans, Eustace offers a convincing explanation for why Americans considered the war a victory despite their failure to attain any war aims with regards to Great Britain and the maritime issues. After all, large-scale Indian resistance against whites' expansionism was broken once and for all. Whereas diplomatic historians have shown that alleged British support for Indians attacking settlers on the frontier played no role in the coming of the war and that the Madison Administration only added the accusation that Great Britain was behind Indian warfare to the list of complaints to make the war declaration more justified, Eustace shows that—whatever their reasons for supporting or opposing the war in 1812—Americans tended to unite behind efforts to displace Native Americans once war operations had commenced. By stressing Indian cruelties and threats to white American civilians, Republicans could generate support for a deeply divisive war. In other words: they tried to make Americans turn their eyes from the East to the West. It remains an open question, however, how influential the discourses Eustace discovered in presidential speeches, newspaper editorials, political cartoons, novels, plays, poems, and tavern songs actually were. Critics of the 'expansionist thesis'—the claim that the United States declared war in order to conquer Canada—maintain that problems along the frontier concerned mostly Westerners and that those residing along the Atlantic seaboard were more concerned with trade. Moreover, Federalists remained vehemently opposed to the war until the British destroyed the American capital and demanded territorial concessions in the peace negotiations in 1814. It is doubtful whether the Republican propaganda efforts emphasizing the Indian threat had much purchase with them.

Lambert dissects the traditional American narrative of the War of 1812 by taking a "British perspective, focusing on the development of policy and strategy in London and

the conduct of war at sea” (3). According to him, the Madison Administration declared war against Great Britain in 1812, since they believed it was “a golden opportunity to seize land from the British” (3). When the United States declared war, Napoleon invaded Russia. Expecting the French dictator to win, Republicans decided to use the opportunity of British distress, Lambert argues, to take British North America—or Canada, as we call it today—and incorporate it into the union. In his analysis, Republicans’ complaints about British interferences with American trade and the impressment of American sailors were a suitable pretext for Republicans to declare a war actually embarked upon for territorial expansion: “In truth American statesmen were not fools; they saw a quarrel about maritime trade and neutral rights as an ideal opportunity to acquire land” (13). If America’s war aim was the conquest of Canada, Britain clearly won the war, since it repelled the American invasions of its provinces in North America, destroyed the American capital, defeated the American navy, and established such an effective blockade of the United States that the American government found itself bankrupt in 1814, customs from imports being the primary source of its revenue. Why—in view of these facts—Americans then boasted that the War of 1812 had been victorious is the question Lambert seeks to answer in his book.

He proceeds in two steps. On the one hand, he reinvestigates naval battles between the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy in order to show that Great Britain won the naval war of 1812. In particular, he shows that the three small-scale naval combats that the American navy won in the early stage of the war and American historians have usually focused their attention on, pale in importance compared to the later frigate battles from which the Royal Navy emerged victorious. On the other hand, he analyzes how American contemporaries at the time have misrepresented the naval encounters and created myths around them to boost American nationalism, thus giving the impression that the United States had won the naval war of 1812.

Lambert dismisses America’s three early naval victories in 1812—the *USS Constitution* versus *HMS Guerrière* in August, the *USS United States* versus the *HMS Macedonian* in October, and the *USS Constitution* versus the *HMS Java* in December—since they were unequal contests: the U.S. 54-gun frigates fought

against smaller and more lightly armed British vessels of only 46 guns. According to Lambert, there was little glory in these battles, since the American frigates were superior to their British equivalents in size, firepower, and crew. Moreover, the outcome of these encounters did not have an influence on the outcome of the war: “They did not affect the balance of power at sea, impede the reinforcement of the Canadian army, or raise British insurance rates” (102). The Republican Administration, however, used these naval exploits to arouse patriotic sentiment at home, which had suffered because of the failed invasions of Canada, and trumpeted the glory of the U.S. Navy. They tried to downplay the fact that Napoleon’s invasion of Russia had failed and French forces were in retreat at the end of 1812, such that Britain would subsequently be able to redeploy forces from Europe to North America and effectively blockade the American coast with its superior navy.

The next year, moreover, witnessed British defeats of American frigates. The turning point in the naval war of 1812 came, according to Lambert, in June 1813 when the *HMS Shannon* defeated the *USS Chesapeake*, restoring British naval prestige in the North Atlantic. As Lambert found that the British frigate won the encounter because of superior seamanship, he is very critical of Americans’ excuses for their defeat. In an attempt to turn the American captain James Lawrence into a martyr, the court martial blamed the defeat on bad luck and thus transformed it into a moral victory, making the words Lawrence ushered when dying in battle into a national rallying cry: “Don’t Give Up the Ship” (184). By that time, however, British naval superiority had resulted in a close blockade of all important American harbors bottling up the remainder of America’s small navy as well as its merchant marine. As a result, only a twelfth of America’s merchant vessels were able to get out to sea in 1814 and the customs revenues of the federal government plummeted, depriving it of the means to keep up the war effort on a meaningful level. American privateering, moreover, increasingly lost in importance, as the Royal Navy established an effective convoy system protecting British merchant vessels and as an increasing number of American privateersmen ended up in British prisons: “After mid-1813 American privateers were responding to British measures. Fewer privateer commissions were taken up as the war

progressed, profit margins declined, and operations were conducted at ever greater distance from the home base" (226). At this point, according to Lambert, the United States had de facto lost the war.

In March 1814, U.S. naval operations in the Pacific came to an end when the U.S. frigate *Essex* had to surrender to a superior British force. According to Lambert, the American captain David Porter was to blame for the loss of his frigate since—in search for glory—he had deliberately sailed into the Chilean port of Valparaiso, even though he knew that the port was a trap in which a superior British force could easily blockade him. When he tried to escape, the *HMS Phoebe* wrecked his ship and he had to surrender. Instead of admitting his mistake in sailing into the Chilean trap, Porter blamed a series of misfortunes for his loss of the *Essex*. The Republican Administration—eager for good news to make up for the renewed failure to invade Canada—adopted Porter's version and hailed the battle as an exemplary display of American heroism. Instead of chastising Porter for irresponsibly taking up a fight with a superior force, Republicans—desperately needing a new national hero—emphasized his unprecedented bravery. Consequently, Republicans prevented a court of enquiry from ascertaining the facts of the naval battle. Lambert is equally critical of Stephen Decatur who commanded the *USS President*. In January 1815, he had to surrender to the *HMS Endymion* after a fair fight in which the British gunnery had proven superior. However, Decatur would subsequently spread the lie that he had actually beaten the *Endymion* and that he had only surrendered after the *HMS Pomone* arrived and he was hence outnumbered.

In 1814, America's economy lay in shambles, the federal government was functionally bankrupt defaulting on payments due on the public debt, its capital was in ashes, and its navy had either been beaten or was bottled up in American ports. In consequence, the Madison Administration instructed its commissioners in Ghent to accept a peace upon the terms of the status quo ante bellum, effectively giving up all its war aims in the face of defeat. Lambert ascribes British victory in the War of 1812 to the failure of American invasions of Canada and to the successful naval blockade of the American coast by the Royal Navy and its ability to put most of the U.S. Navy and American privateers out of action.

Since the War of 1812 was a mere sideshow to Great Britain, few British contemporaries bothered to investigate the conflict, leaving the field open to American writers who, Lambert complains, have tended to distort the facts. As a result, many American historians have come to the erroneous conclusion that the War of 1812 had not been an American defeat but a tie between both countries.

The merit of Lambert's monograph is that it provides a needed corrective to previous American interpretations of the naval aspects of the War of 1812. Together with Brian Arthur—who has already shown in 2011 that the Royal Navy won the naval war of 1812 and that Britain's naval blockade of the United States in 1813 and 1814 decisively contributed to the Madison Administration's decision to drop the neutral trade and impressment issues in the peace negotiations—Lambert demonstrates convincingly that the emergence of American national heroes in the naval war of 1812 had less to do with their accomplishments than with Republicans' need for glorious news to generate support for the floundering war effort.¹ Their works are particularly important, since the historiography of the War of 1812 has been dominated by American and Canadian historians, while British historians have so far neglected the conflict—understandable in view of the fact that, to the British, the War of 1812 was a mere distraction from their much more existential conflict with Napoleonic France.

Lambert's deliberately British perspective, however, also makes him oblivious to Republicans' motives, the domestic context of the war declaration in the United States, and the psychological needs of a postcolonial nation. For example, there is little appreciation for the complexities of Republican ideology when he writes that "Jefferson was, at heart, authoritarian and anti-democratic" (22) or when he detects in Jefferson's policies a "trend towards totalitarianism" (22). Lambert also underestimates the implications of the British practice of impressing seamen from American merchant ships on the high seas for American nationalism when he dismisses American complaints by observing that "less than 10 per cent of the American

¹ Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812-1815* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011).

maritime workforce suffered” impressment and that “[n]o more than half the men impressed from American ships were actually Americans” (27). It is understandable that a newly independent nation would be sensitive to blatant violations of its sovereignty by the former mother country. Lambert is too quick in diminishing Republicans’ moral outrage at British maritime practices as mere rhetoric disguising their actual land hunger. The ‘expansionist thesis,’ originally brought forward by American historians such as Louis Morton Hacker and Julius Pratt, has been thoroughly repudiated by scholars such as Bradford Perkins and Donald R. Hickey, but Lambert does not engage this literature.² So his claim that Republicans declared war to annex Canada is not very convincing.

In contrast to Lambert, Gilje emphasizes that the protection of America’s foreign trade and her seamen were the primary causes of the War of 1812, dismissing the claim that the United States went to war to annex Canada or to end alleged British assistance to Native Americans along the frontier. However, he does not simply reiterate the maritime issues between both English-speaking countries, as many other scholars have done in detail. Instead, like Eustace, he takes a cultural approach to understand the origins and legacy of the War of 1812. He poignantly shows that, to Americans in the postrevolutionary period, free trade and sailors’ rights symbolized the success of the American Revolution and that they therefore interpreted their violation by Great Britain as an attack on their democratic aspirations. The Republican elite associated free trade with the Enlightenment belief that increasing international commerce would lead to world peace and those at the bottom of the social ladder hoped that free trade would promote economic growth and thus create more jobs and higher wages. Sailors’ rights were also deeply linked to the revolutionary heritage. In the colonial period, sailors had been considered the lowest class in a strictly hierarchized society. After independence, as Gilje points out, their treatment thus became a standard of measurement for American egalitarianism. No longer part of a rigid social structure, sailors were given full citizenship in the United States, according to Gilje, and

their abuse by the Royal Navy was henceforth interpreted as a challenge to America’s democratic self-conception and perceived as a threat to the very success of the American Revolution. He concludes that free trade and sailors’ rights became part of America’s national identity and combined the Enlightenment hopes of the Republican leadership and the democratic aspirations of the common people. Their symbolic importance thus transcended the immediate diplomatic issues at hand and explains why the West and the South—sections of the country that were less involved in foreign trade than the Northeast—were vociferous in their support for the war.

More clearly than historians analyzing the strictly diplomatic aspects of neutral trade and impressment, Gilje demonstrates how free trade and sailors’ rights were symbolically linked to the heritage of the American Revolution and explains why Republicans interpreted their violation as an attack not only on American sovereignty but on the foundations of American identity that needed to be resisted by a recourse to war. Since Gilje is mostly laying out the larger cultural significance of free trade and sailors’ rights and does not analyze in detail the politics behind America’s war declaration, his account could leave one with the impression that the war was inevitable and that armed conflict was the only way to satisfy America’s democratic sensibilities. Even though it was probably not Gilje’s intention to declare the War of 1812 as unavoidable, his book thus raises an important issue about postrevolutionary America, namely that the American Revolution did not produce a peaceful nation content with its newly established democratic institutions but rather created a nationalistic, aggressive society that believed war was a suitable means to assert its political principles internationally. Rather than accepting Britain’s naval policies as a reaction to Napoleonic warfare on the Continent, Republicans believed they needed to militarily make their former mother country acknowledge the superiority of the American political system.

Gilje’s book portrays a nationalistically aroused American society that in 1812, by referring to the ideals of the American Revolution and the alleged threat Britons posed to them, felt justified in waging war against the former mother country in order to affirm their democratic principles. Eustace exposes how Republicans subsequently sought to unite

² Jasper M. Trautsch, “The Causes of the War of 1812: 200 Years of Debate,” in: *Journal of Military History* 77.1 (2013): 275-278.

the divided nation during the war by inciting hatred of Indians and by clearing the lands in the West from Native American populations. Lambert's book shows how Republicans used the War of 1812 to promote American nationalism by building up national heroes who had allegedly displayed better skills and more courage and thus demonstrated the superior-

ity of republican over monarchical principles. The traditional narrative—blaming Great Britain for the War of 1812 and declaring the United States its victor—can no longer be upheld, as it has been exposed as a nationalistic American myth.

Paris

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