

The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies by Alan Taylor

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Volume 104, Number 1, Spring 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065398ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065398ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dunnigan, B. L. (2012). Review of [*The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* by Alan Taylor]. *Ontario History*, 104(1), 210–211. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065398ar>

The Civil War of 1812

American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies

by Alan Taylor

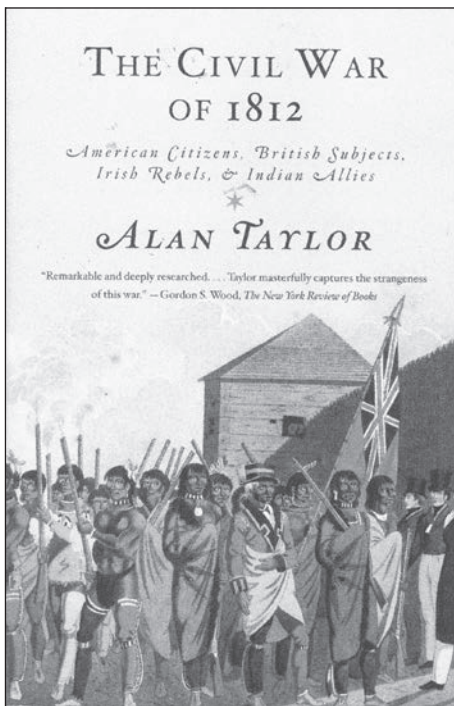
New York, Random House, 2010. 640 pages. \$40.00 hardcover (Knopf), ISBN 987-1-4000-4265-4;
\$20.00 softcover (Vintage), ISBN: 978-0-679-77673-4 (www.randomhouse.ca)

The bicentennial of the War of 1812 is upon us, and the past few years have seen the anticipated rush of new titles addressing the conflict, specific aspects of it, its participants, and their material culture. In *The Civil War of 1812*, Alan Taylor provides a fresh and thought-provoking view of a contest between distinct elements of the North American population of the early nineteenth century, groups defined in his subtitle as American citizens, British subjects, Irish rebels, and Indian allies. Focusing his attention on these groups, the author skillfully tells his story in the context of their politics, aspirations, actions, and shortcomings.

Taylor's treatment of the War of 1812 is not a comprehensive history, having little to say of the fighting at sea or of the British amphibious operations that carried the war to the East and Gulf coasts of the United States. Rather, he presents it as a "borderlands" history (p. 10) that focuses most of its attention on the land and water campaigns fought along the frontier between the United States and Upper Canada—from Montréal to De-

troit. It was here that Thomas Jefferson's flip-pant remark that the conquest of Canada would be "a mere matter of marching" was belied by American military incompetence and effective resistance by a small but capable British army supported by Native Americans and many Canadians.

The attitudes and motivations of the white population of Upper Canada were complex and often problematic when called upon to defend their province. Taylor effectively explains the reasons in a lucid introductory account of the development of Upper Canada from the end of the American Revolution to the eve of the War of 1812. This is mirrored by a similar discussion of American attitudes toward Britain and the divisive politics within the United States. These chapters support Taylor's argument that the War of 1812 was part of



a North American contest between republic and empire (pp. 12; 43). Upper Canada and the United States, he maintains, had been "incompletely separated" by the American Revolution, and the struggle between the opposing ideologies set the stage for civil

war in 1812. The conflict resulted in a much “sharper distinction” between Upper Canada and the United States and ensured that postwar Canada would develop along the model of empire rather than republic (pp. 457-58).

It is Taylor’s characterization of the fighting of 1812-1814 as a civil war that sets this book apart from other treatments of the conflict. His argument is both convincing and well documented. In addition to the linguistic and cultural similarities of the opponents, many Upper Canadians were former citizens of the United States. They had arrived in a post-Revolution flow of Americans seeking free land, and the allegiances of these “late Loyalists” were often questionable. Indeed, some overtly supported the Americans, and uncertainty about their inclinations greatly complicated defense against invasions, particularly at places like Detroit and Niagara.

The organization of this book deals effectively with the geographically scattered fronts along which fighting occurred in each of three years of warfare. The book is divided into chapters that focus on specific areas or topics and is then further broken down into shorter sections recounting military and political events, usually from the perspectives of participants and with an emphasis on relations between soldiers and civilians. Although this approach presupposes at least a general understanding of the War of 1812 by readers, it allows events to be presented in

such a way as to clearly explain their relationship to the author’s vision of this “civil war.”

Taylor’s narrative is clear and very much to the point. He has little sympathy for the military blundering and politically motivated strategies of the United States and is often brutally frank in his assessments of them. British and Canadian mistakes are recounted as well, but the author clearly has no regard for any claims of a military victory by the United States. He further maintains that histories written on both sides of the border reflect postwar nationalism and obscure the divisive elements that contributed to making this a civil war.

Taylor has a great command of the sources documenting the War of 1812, and his book includes an extensive and useful bibliography. His treatment reflects a good understanding of the people and places of the time, although his consistent use of “Detroit Valley” and “Niagara Valley” to describe the regions around those two large rivers is peculiar. This book is very well written in a style that makes it highly accessible. It should be read by all students of the War of 1812 and of Ontario history. It is highly recommended.

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The Astonishing General: The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock

by Wesley B. Turner

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011. 369 pages, illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index.
\$35.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-777-4. (www.dundurn.com)

In his 1999 study *British Generals of the War of 1812*, historian Wesley Turner explored the reasons why Major-General Isaac Brock, who held responsibility for the military defence and civil administra-

tion of Upper Canada, has emerged as the iconic general of that conflict. No other British commander from the war has been as frequently and as publically commemorated as Brock and interest in his life is