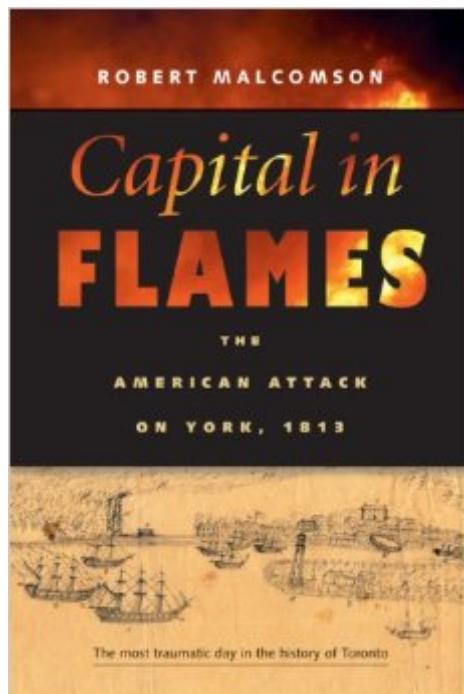


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Capital In Flames: The American Attack On York, 1813



Synopsis

As Canada's central depot and naval dockyard on the Great Lakes early in the War of 1812, the capital frontier town of York (present-day Toronto) was a prime target for American forces. In April 1813 a squadron of warships under U.S. Commodore Isaac Chauncey sailed up Lake Ontario and landed about 1,800 soldiers there as the renowned explorer Gen. Zebulon Pike led his men into battle. Though the Americans took the town, their victory proved disappointing. Malcomson challenges conventional ideas about the battle as he brings to life the politicians, soldiers, and citizens whose destinies clashed at York.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As an American, I know surprisingly little about the War of 1812. It could be summed up into Andrew Jackson and the Battle of New Orleans; the British burning of Washington D.C; and Francis Scott Key writing the National Anthem. Thank goodness for renowned experts like Robert Malcomson whose excellent book "Capital in Flames: The American Attack on York, 1813" will educate a new generation. Malcomson begins by giving an administrative overview of Upper and Lower Canada in the early 1800s, and an introduction to the military personalities that would later influence the events of the battle of York (Toronto). The ambitions of Governor Sir George Prevost to build York into the British prime naval base on the Great Lakes, clouded his ability to see that the town was poorly sited for defense against American attack. The die had been cast for this frontier town. Going back to my ignorance of the War of 1812, I almost missed the explanation for how the war came to be. For a war that came about over trade embargoes and Americans being pressed into service on British

ships, Malcomson coverage of the international relations among England, France, and the United States in the early 1800s was adequate for the purposes of the book. A battle is merely a point in time in an overall campaign. Malcomson provides a detailed look into the campaign season of 1812, and further delves into the strategy of America for the opening of the 1813 campaign season. With the thawing of the lakes in April 1813, Maj Gen Dearborn and Commodore Chauncey set out for the first ever combined Navy / Army amphibious operation in American history. Malcomson supports the description of the battle with multiple charts showing the position of forces as the battle unfolded.

This is truly an excellent book, and the one review with a single star rating obviously meant to give the book a five star rating. The book covers the American attack on Toronto, known as York at the time, in the War of 1812, but it is much more than that. Author Malcomson gives a very complete background of the conflict on the US/Canadian border, indeed from the Canadian side -- a factor that made the book even more interesting to me. Its scholarly coverage is evidenced by the fact that of the book's 489 pages, 158 are appendices, notes, etc. As usual in this war, there was much blundering and bravery on both sides. Each made extensive use of poorly trained militia, and the results were sometimes farcical. The Americans executed their first ever amphibious operation and it was successful. A well-known military leader was lost, General Zebulon Pike, the man who gave his name to Pike's Peak in Colorado. The Canadians fought fiercely, if unevenly, and ultimately their capital of Upper Canada was burned by the Americans, although the expedition turned out to have little effect on the outcome of the war. On the other hand, the events were extremely important to the residents of York and environs. The writing is crisp and even exciting. Somehow the narrative does not flag in the details, and I found myself hoping that the York citizens would somehow pull a rabbit out of the hat and repel the invaders. However, the American naval strength was too great, and the British attention was focused on other theaters. Commodore Chauncey was extremely active in building up American naval power on Lake Ontario, and both General Dearborn on the American side and General Prevost on the British were guilty of blunders and ineptitude.

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