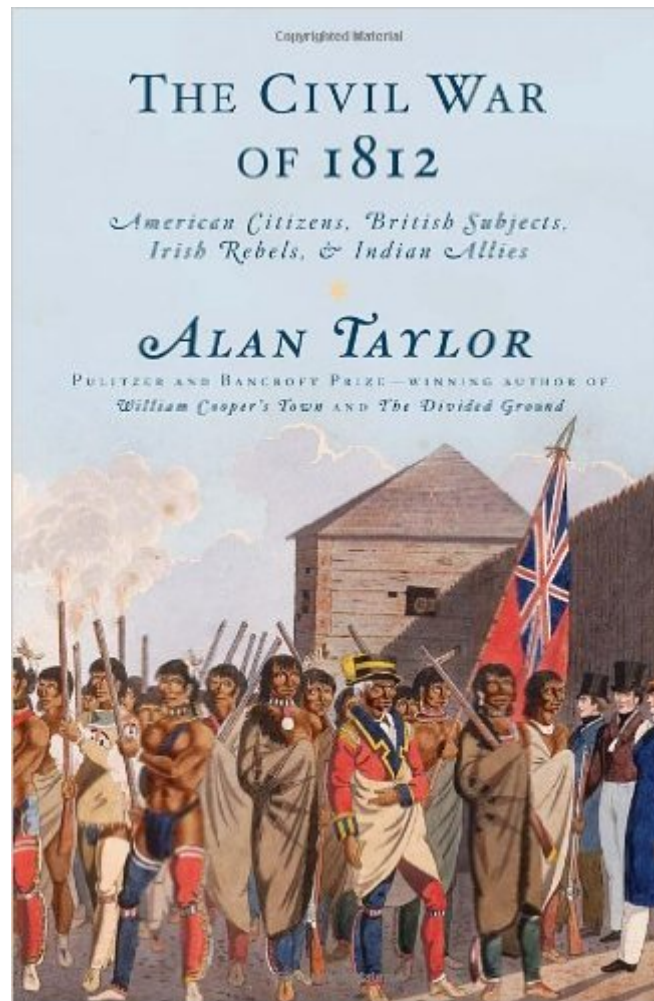


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The Civil War Of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies



Synopsis

In this deeply researched and clearly written book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Alan Taylor tells the riveting story of a war that redefined North America. During the early nineteenth century, Britons and Americans renewed their struggle over the legacy of the American Revolution. Soldiers, immigrants, settlers, and Indians fought in a northern borderland to determine the fate of a continent. Would revolutionary republicanism sweep the British from Canada? Or would the British empire contain, divide, and ruin the shaky American republic? In a world of double identities, slippery allegiances, and porous boundaries, the leaders of the republic and of the empire struggled to control their own diverse peoples. The border divided Americans—former Loyalists and Patriots—who fought on both sides in the new war, as did native peoples defending their homelands. Serving in both armies, Irish immigrants battled one another, reaping charges of rebellion and treason. And dissident Americans flirted with secession while aiding the British as smugglers and spies. During the war, both sides struggled to sustain armies in a northern land of immense forests, vast lakes, and stark seasonal swings in the weather. In that environment, many soldiers panicked as they fought their own vivid imaginations, which cast Indians as bloodthirsty savages. After fighting each other to a standstill, the Americans and the British concluded that they could safely share the continent along a border that favored the United States at the expense of Canadians and Indians. Both sides then celebrated victory by forgetting their losses and by betraying the native peoples. A vivid narrative of an often brutal (and sometimes comic) war that reveals much about the tangled origins of the United States and Canada.

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Customer Reviews

Alan Taylor has written a well researched and very readable book on the War of 1812. It is a much overlooked war in the teaching of American history; so it was with much anticipation that I opened this volume. Unless you are able to read the editorial reviews, you might not have any idea that this book only covers the war on the Canadian border and frontier. That is the civil war of the title, one between Americans and their Canadian counterparts, not necessarily the British. There are only one or two minor references to the burning of Washington, the Battle of Fort McHenry or the naval battles and what their results were for the American nation. I would have preferred at least some sort of epilogue rather than a complete ignoring of the repercussions of, for example the sinking of the British HMS Guerriere, which was a major victory for a nation with no real navy. The peace talks are well recounted with the exception of leaving out what were some of these major factors in the war. There is some description of the Battle of New Orleans which was really after the fact. Taylor's turn of phrasing and his writing style is marvelous, it is almost a forgotten art. He does build blocks of understanding, giving the background of social-political feelings pre 1812, explaining the feelings that were remnants of the revolution of 1776. He does well, also in presenting the Canadian view of the barbarous actions of some of the US patriots. International events that always add to the avalanche of wars, the French Revolution and British seizures of merchant ships and impressments of sailors are well described. Part of the reasons for calling this a civil war were the elements of former Irish citizens fighting and the conflict of Anglican versus Catholic faith.

The Civil War of 1812 is a fresh and fascinating look at a little understood war between the British Empire and the new American republic in the wilderness of North America. The book is not primarily a military history, although the war along the Canadian border is covered in great detail. Readers should be aware that the history of the war in other parts of North America, and at sea, are only very lightly covered. The history is also not restricted to the years of the war (1812-15) but instead covers the entire history of the border region from the end of the American Revolution through 1839. In the years before the War of 1812, British policy in Canada encouraged American migration to its underpopulated provinces, as Britain actively sought to create an alternate vision of North America that would appeal to residents in what many thought would be a short lived republican experiment in the United States. Britain offered free land to American settlers of Upper Canada, but offered a more restricted press and more tightly controlled government. When war came, many of the newest settlers actively rebelled against the British government, contrary to later popular Canadian myth. The United States eventually cold-heartedly sacrificed these rebels to their fate. The United States

had many problems including severe internal political divisions between Federalists and Republicans that prevented the republic from fighting an effective war against the British. The author presents lots of evidence of local Federalist betrayal of the war effort and slip shod management by the governing Republicans.

This work concentrates on the conflict between the Canadians, British and Indians against the Americans along the Canadian border, specifically the western Canadian or Upper Canadian border, during the War of 1812. It is a valuable addition to the literature on the war, particularly since so many works concentrate on the Battle of New Orleans, the burning of Washington and the British attempt to take Baltimore, and sometimes the Battle of Plattsburgh. The author takes pains to develop the ethnic divisions between Canadians and Americans, or lack thereof, before and during the war. Surprisingly, the author identifies the immigrants from Ireland all as "Irish", mostly adherents to the "United Irishmen", calling them a "mixture of Protestants and Catholics." In actuality, they were almost all Presbyterian Irish, more commonly called Scotch-Irish, of mixed Irish and Scot ancestry. He is correct in his depiction of many settlers having become somewhat disillusioned with the nascent United States government, being forced to pretty much provide for their own security against the Indians with the Whiskey Rebellion fresh in their minds. The group that had emigrated to Upper Canada was up for grabs in respect to their loyalty, but the American forces, particularly through their reliance on militia and with incompetent leadership, squandered their chances to bring Upper Canada into the United States. Of course, there was never any chance of gaining the loyalty of Catholic Lower Canada that was steeped in Civil Law and adherence to a crown. For the American reader, this conflict takes on a dreary litany of defeats, mistakes, heavy casualties, much suffering, and woeful leadership. Seen from the Canadian side, however, it is not much better.

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