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## Review Essay

# War of 1812 Trilogy



William S. Dudley

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***Field of Glory: The Battle of Cryslers Farm, 1813.*** By Donald E. Graves. Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 1999. Maps. Illustrations. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xx, 426. \$24.95.

***Where Right and Glory Lead! The Battle of Lundy's Lane, 1814.*** Rev. ed. By Donald E. Graves. Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 1997 [1996, 1992]. Maps. Illustrations. Maps. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xvii, 332. \$22.95.

***And All Their Glory Past: Fort Erie, Plattsburgh, and the Final Battles in the North, 1814.*** By Donald E. Graves. Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 2013. Maps. Illustrations. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xvi, 419. \$24.95.

Donald E. Graves, one of Canada's leading military historians, has recently completed the third book of his trilogy on War of 1812 battles in the Canada-United States borderlands. For most Americans, this campaign is rarely studied and not well understood. It was in the north that the most strategic battles were fought on land and lakes. While the war of June 1812 to February 1815 is considered "forgotten" by some in the United States, it is anything but forgotten in Canada, where the conflict is considered a British North American victory and is thus a building block of Canadian nationality. Graves's task in preparing these volumes was daunting, as seen in the over 1100 pages of text and scholarly apparatus and the more than 20 years which spanned the publication of the first, second, and third volumes.

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**William S. Dudley** served as the Director of the Naval Historical Center from 1995 to 2004. He edited *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, 3 vols., and James Fenimore Cooper's *Ned Myers, or A Life Before the Mast*. Since retirement in 2004, he has completed *Maritime Maryland: A History* (2010) and *The Naval War of 1812: America's Second War of Independence* (2013). He resides in Easton, Maryland.

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Graves's first volume described and analyzed the Battle of Lundy's Lane of 1814, the major land engagement of that year, fascinating because it was one of the most ferocious actions fought between the Anglo-American "cousins" on North American soil. Soon after completing *Where Right and Glory Lead!* in 1993, he turned back the clock to study and recount the campaign of the previous year which culminated in the battles of Chateauguay and Crysler's Field in Lower Canada. This was published as *Field of Glory* in 1999 and evidently found its audience, for the author celebrated its fifth printing in 2011. In the final volume of the trilogy, *And All Their Glory Past*, Graves follows the action from the siege of Fort Erie on the Niagara Peninsula to the battle of Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain in the Adirondack region of New York State and back to Upper Canada for the last skirmishes of 1814.

In *Field of Glory*, Graves sets the tone for his study of events in the second year of the war with a foreword by the late Colonel John Elting, US Army (Ret.), who was himself a historian of the War of 1812. Elting condemns the U.S. Army of 1812-13 as poorly led by superannuated generals, officered largely by political appointees, and fought by untrained amateurs in uniform. It would take more than a year of humiliating defeats for the U.S. Army to prove that it could stand up to British regulars on the field of battle. At the outset, Graves summarizes the whirlpool of European warfare that gradually drew the United States into its second war with Britain just thirty years after the end of the Revolutionary War. With citizens land hungry and threatened by British-Indian resistance on the western frontiers, unable to carry on trade as a neutral with Britain and France without loss of ships and sailors, and unsuccessful in finding a diplomatic solution, President Madison paved the way for a Congressional declaration of war even though the nation he led was unprepared for the conflict. Graves, evenhandedly, does not spare Britain for its "masterful combination of arrogance, stupidity and short-sightedness in its relations with the young republic."

The American strategy in 1812, such as it was, planned for three distinct attacks against British Canada: at Detroit led by General William Hull, at Montreal led by General Henry Dearborn, and at Niagara under Generals Stephen Van Rensselaer and Alexander Smyth. Each failed for lack of proper planning, logistics, and leadership. The one major blow suffered by British forces was the death of General Isaac Brock on Queenston Heights at the hands of American riflemen. Brock's brilliant tactics at Detroit and Niagara to that point had made the most of Canada's fewer troops and cooperative Indian allies.

Madison's government failed to understand that a successful land campaign in the lakes region would depend on naval control of the lakes. Although most of Graves's attention is focused on land warfare, the naval war on the lakes receives due respect. Throughout the three volumes under discussion, Graves lays out the endemic problems of communication, coordination, and collaboration on the part of the U.S. and Royal Navy commodores and their military peers and superiors. U.S. Commodore Chauncey was reluctant to leave his Sackets Harbor base to assist the army unless he had dominance on Lake Ontario. In *And All Their Glory Past*, the

author demonstrates a similar truculence on the part of British Commodore James Lucas Yeo. His immediate superior, Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, was both Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief of British North America. Prevost understood he would have to fight a defensive war as he was not likely to receive reinforcements until Napoleon had been defeated. Prevost, however, expected far more from Yeo than he ultimately received in terms of timely collaboration. The result, as Graves points out, was damaging to Prevost's reputation.

The battles of the 1813 campaign include the amphibious landings of the U.S. Army (Left Division) at York and Fort George, the British attack on Sackets Harbor, and the American defeats at Stoney Creek and Beaver Dams which convinced Secretary of War John Armstrong to order Major General James Wilkinson to sail to the eastern end of Lake Ontario before embarking on the disastrous St. Lawrence River expedition. Graves underscores the difficult relationships among Armstrong, Wilkinson, and Major General Wade Hampton. Poorly led American troops suffered because of Armstrong's deceitful mismanagement, Wilkinson's vacillation, and hatred between Wilkinson and Hampton. Graves convincingly demonstrates how fewer troops under superior British leadership and discipline produced victories at Chateaugay and Crysler's Farm. He includes in these and later actions the role of John Norton, a First Nations' chief of Scottish and Mohawk Indian parentage, who led a group of the Delaware, Onondaga, Cayuga, Mohawk, Ottawa, Chippewa, and Mississauga nations.

*Where Right and Glory Lead!* shows a rejuvenated U.S. Army in 1814 by then rid of its ailing and weak-willed generals. Replacing them was a younger, more energetic generation: Major Generals Jacob Brown, George Izard, and William Henry Harrison, and Brigadier Generals Winfield Scott, Edmund Gaines, and Alexander Macomb. In Canada, Governor General Prevost had found in Lieutenant General Gordon Drummond and Major General Phineas Riall, leaders of proven bravery and energy. Returning to Niagara in May 1814, Generals Brown and Scott set up a vigorous training regime to ensure their troops would be steadfast and could maneuver under enemy fire. They also enforced good hygiene in the camps, ensured the troops had proper uniforms, and paid their soldiers on time. These factors strengthened morale and infused Brown's army with confidence in its leaders. The outcome is stirringly told in the narrative of the Battles of Chippawa and Lundy's Lane, where the U.S. Army recovered its reputation against stout resistance. Drummond's troops then numbered 3,638, being comprised of 2,226 British regulars, 852 Canadian regulars, and 550 militia. Prevost had refused Drummond's request for reinforcements and retained some 4,000 at hand at Kingston and Montreal against the possibility that the U.S. might launch another attack from Sackets Harbor or Plattsburgh. Brown's three brigades plus artillery and cavalry totaled about 900 fewer at 2,778.

Graves's narrative is at its best in portraying the preparations for battle, and the thrust and parry of the battlefield from the perspective of the foot-slogging soldiers as well as that of the well-mounted generals. The expected American attack commenced on July 3, as Brown's troops crossed the Niagara River from Buffalo and surged around

the weakly garrisoned Fort Erie which quickly surrendered. Next came the Battle of Chippawa which showed the improved conduct of the American troops under fire. The hard-fought, confusing Battle of Lundy's Lane commenced at nightfall on July 25 and lasted five hours, until midnight, when the troops of both sides were exhausted. With advantage changing frequently and fighting at close quarters, the Americans gained the height and captured the artillery as the British retreated. Yet, having suffered much, the Americans also withdrew after the battle, without taking the enemy's guns with them. Graves considered this battle to be the "bloodiest action of the war," second only to the Battle of New Orleans. At Lundy's Lane, American troops paid dearly for their valor. Graves's commentary enters a historiographical fray with certain Canadian historians who have argued, without considering contrary evidence, that the British recaptured their own guns at bayonet point during the battle.

In Graves's final book, *And All Their Glory Past*, the main event is the siege of Fort Erie, but coverage extends to include the Battles of Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain and the final battles in Upper Canada. After Lundy's Lane, Drummond, who had been wounded (as had been both Brown and Scott), pursued Brown's army and found it had reinforced the Fort Erie garrison, strengthened its defenses, and had the advantage of resupply from depots across the Niagara River. Lacking supplies for a prolonged siege, Drummond ordered a night assault on the fort, but it was a costly failure. Incessant rains, poor timing, the lack of surprise, and a huge explosion in one of the bastions where the attackers had gathered, contributed to one of the costliest British disasters of the war. Two days later an American sortie destroyed two heavy gun batteries and ensured Drummond's withdrawal, which had already begun. From this point on, the war diminished on the Niagara peninsula, although farther west, American raids laid waste the Canadian countryside.

In this third volume, the author interrupts his narrative of the Fort Erie siege just before the American sortie to shift attention to the Lake Champlain theater and to bring the British campaign in the Chesapeake into the story, in five chapters (100 pages). Then he returns to Niagara to complete the final events at Fort Erie, including General Izard's arrival with a sizeable portion of the U.S. Army (Right Division), formerly stationed between Plattsburgh and Sackets Harbor. To disrupt the narrative in this way and move into discussions of strategy, diplomacy, and distant operations may throw some readers off track. These topics might have been introduced in the volume's later chapters to produce a smoother read. In considering the organization of this trilogy, Graves might have placed Commodore Perry's September 1813 victory over Commodore Barclay, Harrison's pursuit of Brigadier General Procter, and the resulting Battle of the Thames (near Moraviantown) in *Field of Glory*, in the second volume, which is devoted almost entirely to events of 1813. Yet, it works well enough in the third volume, *And All Their Glory Past*, because it builds the segue to U.S. Army Brigadier General Duncan McArthur's raid into western Upper Canada in late October 1814. This led to a series of events lacking attention in most U. S. histories of the War of 1812.

Graves excels in using apt quotations from original sources. He has made extensive use of American, British, and Canadian public archives and historical

society libraries in his search for documents. For example, in reconstructing the events of the 1813-14 campaigns, he relies on the letters, journals and autobiographies of not only the leading personalities, but also of the mid-level officers and ordinary foot soldiers. Several appealing characteristics of Graves's style are his mordant sense of humor, his appreciation of soldiers' anecdotes, and the inclusion of one or two stanzas of soldiers' songs, "the poetry of the lower ranks," that introduce most chapters. Each book contains valuable appendices, clear maps, good illustrations, and explanatory citations which enhance the text. Taken together, these volumes make an essential and important contribution to the history of the war, written by a master of the genre. This trilogy is highly recommended reading for U.S. students and scholars who have not taken the time or made the effort to comprehend the War of 1812 in the Canada-U.S. borderlands.

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