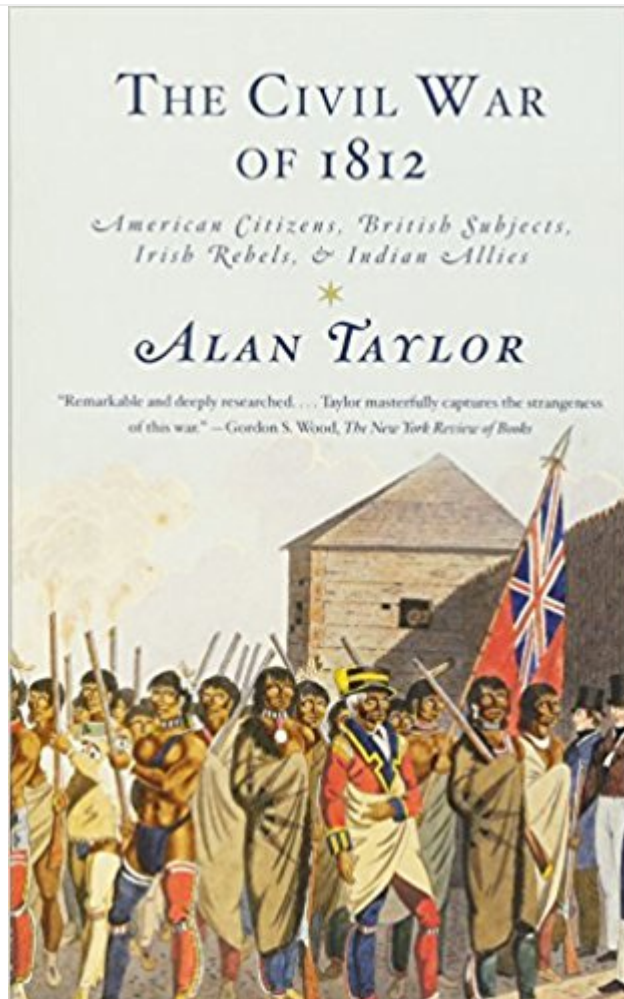


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The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies. By Alan Taylor (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010). Pp. 620. Cloth, \$35.00.

In his new work on the War of 1812, Alan Taylor strays from customary national histories of the conflict. Focusing instead on the borderland region between Montreal and Detroit, he seeks to demonstrate the ideological struggle between the British Empire and the American Republic as the two nations waged war for the hearts and minds of borderland inhabitants. This ideological warfare “blurred the national boundaries and political identities in North America” as American political rivals battled each other, Irish fought Irish, and native peoples divided their loyalty between the two powers (8). Utilizing an array of secondary and primary sources—including personal collections, military reports, government records, and contemporary newspapers—Taylor skillfully weaves narrative and analysis to tell the story of America’s lesser known civil war.

The American Revolution divided the victorious citizens of the republic and the Loyalist-subjects who fled to Canada during the conflict. The battle for individual allegiances continued through the decades as upwards of 30,000 “Late Loyalists” migrated north to settle Upper Canada before 1812. Invited by British officials, these Loyalists received the benefits of subjects and were expected to defend the empire against the threat of encroaching republicanism. Concurrently, thousands of Irish traversed the Atlantic seeking political equality and economic opportunity in the United States. By choosing to become American citizens, Taylor argues, immigrants reenacted the Revolution on an individual scale. Many of these Irish-Americans fought their fellow Irish who alternatively fled poverty by enlisting in the British forces. Treated as traitors rather than prisoners of war if captured, Irish-American migrants symbolized the British belief that the status of “subject” was permanent and superior to the republican citizen. Insisting they had the right to reclaim every wavering Briton—and desperately seeking manpower to fuel their war with France—the British Navy also

impressed any U.S. sailor they believed to be a naturally born subject. Impressment represented a counterrevolution, Taylor contends, as it effectively undermined American independence and implied that Americans remained colonists when outside of their national boundaries.

Ideological disputes over citizen and subject—national identity by choice or by birth—within the Anglo world proved only one division amidst a larger civil war on the North American continent. Propelled to war by British trade restrictions, impressment, and Indian warfare on the frontier, Americans entered the War of 1812 politically divided and still insecure of their dominance in the borderlands. Partisan disputes raged as Republicans and Federalists fought for the future of American independence. Republicans demonized Federalists as traitors who sought re-colonization to the empire, while Federalists proclaimed that Republicans would ally with Napoleon, “subject Americans to French domination,” and destroy the republic (129). Political squabbles over war strategy, funding, and patronage helped to foible the American invasion of Canada as it “promoted spying for, and smuggling with, the British” (438). The inability of American politicians to set aside partisan and sectional issues debilitated the invading force and put the republican experiment in peril.

Native Americans living in the northern borderlands divided loyalties as well. Rumored atrocities by native warriors inspired dread in American soldiers. At the outset, American forces were reluctant to ally with natives, but by the middle of 1813, many officers “sought to reverse the American policy that had rejected the employment of Indian warriors” (228). In particular, Americans sought help from the Haudenosaunee Indians, a powerful Seneca nation living along Buffalo Creek. Relying on payments from the state and federal governments, and fearing that their native rivals would exploit British victories and seize valuable hunting grounds, the Buffalo Creek Indians threw in their lot with American troops after a combined British and native force raided Black Rock on July 11. “This new dimension,” Taylor claims, “shocked the British and their native allies” because “the British considered themselves the natural ally of all Indians” (231).

The porous national border, and the shifting allegiances of both Natives and Anglos, proved a constant obstacle for each nation. In a struggle for

the hearts and minds of the borderland inhabitants, spying for, or supplying the enemy seriously undermined the war effort. National identity proved fluid on the frontier as Taylor argues that “among rural people on both sides of the border, personal relationships mattered more than abstract allegiance to nationalism” (292). Because Americans remained the majority on both sides of the border, leaders in the United States believed that locals would rise up and join the invading army, but the continued plundering by American soldiers helped to engender a Canadian nationalism which further exacerbated the divisions between republic and empire. Both armies sought to win the propaganda war by portraying the other as uncivilized and injurious to the individual. Americans decried the tactics of British-allied Indians, ignoring their own use of natives. The British continually praised the order of their hierarchal society, contrasting it with the chaotic world of republicanism. Opposing commanders jostled for the support of locals and the loyalty of their own troops as desertion to enemy lines remained a chronic problem. By the war’s end, however, after years of looting soldiers, political propaganda, and economic uncertainty, the border between Upper Canada and the United States became more defined.

As Taylor illustrates, the American Revolution exposed the rifts and continuities between the two nations. While the United States adopted a more decentralized government after 1800, the British consolidated their power in Ireland and Canada. The American Republic allowed immigrants to become citizens, recreating their revolution on an individual scale, while British officials waged a counterrevolution by recruiting Americans to Upper Canada and impressing U.S. sailors at sea. Far from waning, however, “the human overlap grew during the first decade of the nineteenth century” as individuals crossed borders, shared the same language, and built a mutual dependence in commerce (122). The civil war of 1812, a direct result of this overlap, eventually “led to sharper distinction between Upper Canada and the United States” as the empire and republic fought for the future of the continent (458). Interacting with a number of historiographies—including political, military, borderland, Native American, and citizenship studies—Taylor’s work will benefit any scholar interested in the early nineteenth-century North American continent.

Jeffrey Thomas Perry

Purdue University



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