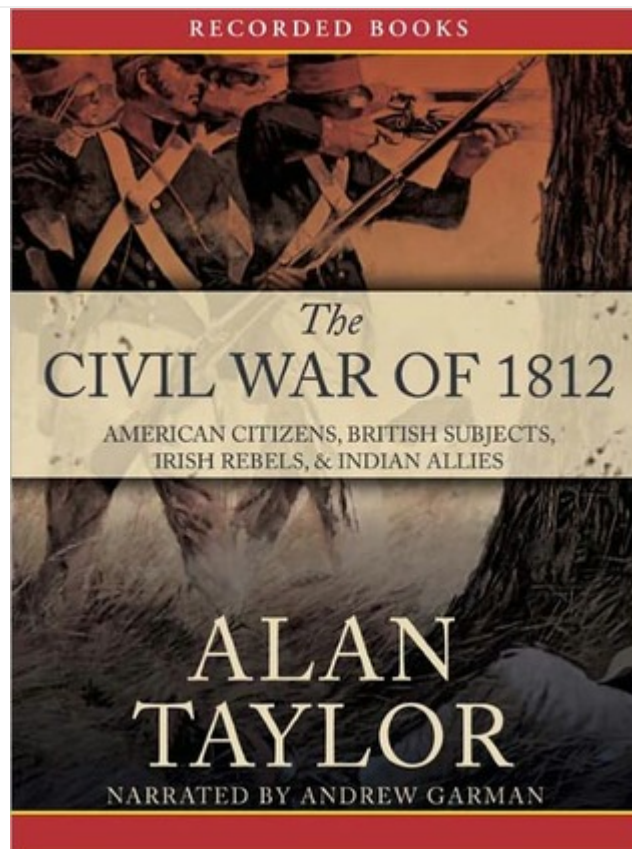


{essays in history}

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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. Hardcover, \$35.00.

While hardly the subject of the same degree of scholarship as the American Revolution or the Civil War, the War of 1812 has enjoyed a fair amount of study in recent years and should see more as its bicentennial approaches.^[1] Most of the literature on the war regards it as a conflict between two distinct nations, the United States and Britain, with clearly defined combatants for either side. Alan Taylor, the award-winning author of *American Colonies*, offers an original and compellingly argued interpretation in his brilliant new work, *The Civil War of 1812*.^[2] Taylor argues that British and American leaders never explicitly determined the boundary between the new United States and Canada and that the war along this ill-defined border possessed all the elements of a civil war. Irish immigrants, some from the same families, battled on either side, while recent citizens of the United States found themselves fighting their former countrymen. Native Americans, an often ignored but vital part of the war, fought for British and American forces alike, in some cases with warriors from the same tribe fighting against each other.

For Taylor, the war began, in large measure, because of conflicting ideas of citizenship. To Americans, citizenship meant voluntarily giving loyalty to a nation and coming under its protection. Given by choice, it also could be revoked, and the new nation received immigrants from Ireland and deserters from the British Navy without qualms. For the British, however, a government ruled and protected subjects, not citizens, and an individual was bound for life to the land of his birth. Taylor does a fine job setting up this contrast and notes the irony of British officials in Canada denying their subjects' right to leave but building their colony by luring Americans with promises of cheap land and compelling them to take an oath of loyalty to the King. The abundance of these "Late Loyalists," who possessed no particular allegiance to the British government, played a crucial role in Americans' belief that Canada would welcome annexation at the outbreak of the War of 1812.

Unfortunately, this belief proved a miscalculation. Late Loyalists and others in Canada might not have felt devotion to the British government,

but they felt no real opposition to it either. They mostly wanted to be left alone. When American forces did invade Canada, they made the worst possible move, stealing supplies from farmers and destroying civilian property. Ambiguous promises about the postwar status of Canada further undermined any chance of the citizenry rallying to the American flag, as President Madison and his government never committed to keep Canada after the war and indeed likely planned to offer some or all of it back on the bargaining table in the event of a successful invasion. Unlikely to turn on a government to which they might be returned, and angered by American depredations, previously neutral Canadians took up arms against the invaders.

Taylor's foray into military history is excellent; he deftly recounts battles, evaluates commanders and brings to light the human element of war, showing the experience of soldiers and civilians alike. He captures the life of the common soldier on either side, but also offers a compelling analysis of the grand objectives of the conflict. For Americans, a war that began as an effort to end impressment and seize Canada shifted to a war with no tangible objectives fought for the nation's honor. Thus, having accomplished nothing that they originally set out to do, the American government and population could claim a moral victory from a settlement of status quo antebellum. This settlement was helped in no small part by the nation's ability to withstand the destruction of its capital, and by victories in Baltimore and New Orleans that Taylor scarcely mentions. Taylor ignores other theaters of the war that fit his civil war paradigm: deserters from the British Navy battling Royal vessels partly manned by pressed Americans, divided Creek and Choctaw tribes, or even divisions among the population of New Orleans could have strengthened the thesis, yet the work ignores them. Readers need not look for a survey of the entire conflict. Yet Taylor acknowledges the book's parameters and essentially sticks to them, accomplishing his purpose quite well.

There are few complaints that can be leveled at this work, and these are of a relatively minor nature. The book has a tendency to be repetitive; one wonders how often the distinction between citizen and subject needs to be explained, for example. Taylor is also a bit loose with his definition of civil war. Domestic opposition to a conflict, even when it turns violent, as with the riots in Baltimore, is markedly different from a civil war. The

Hartford Convention came close, though it is covered rather superficially. That said, *The Civil War of 1812* gives far more to praise than criticize. It significantly enhances our understanding of the nature of the Canadian theater, where the bulk of the fighting took place, and Taylor's argument is a crucial addition to the scholarship on the war.

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[1] A few examples include: Jeremy Black, *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009); James C. Ellis, *A Ruinous and Unhappy War: New England in the War of 1812* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009); Donald Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship!: Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); and Reginald C. Stuart, *Civil-Military Relations in the War of 1812* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2009).

[2] Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Viking, 2001).



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