

PREFACE

I grew up not far from Gettysburg and Valley Forge in Pennsylvania, sites of two of the most important events in American military history. I recall visiting them when I was a child and suppose in some way these experiences helped fashion in me a lifelong love of history. As a professor, part of my job is to promote civic and history education. To that end, it was apparent to me that the War of 1812 has remained an under-appreciated conflict. Few people—reporters, students, politicians, or the general public—know very much about this fascinating war, one that played a significant role in shaping American history but one that was also accurately described by President Harry Truman as America’s “silliest damned war.”

However, the years 2012 through 2015 mark the bicentennial of the War of 1812 and I am optimistic that the events throughout Canada, the United States, and even in Britain have helped to raise awareness. Sadly, there remains a remarkable disconnect in America over the war and its causes and consequences, less so than in Canada where the war is a source of national pride. Sandra Shaul, a city administrator in Canada working on various bicentennial projects, noted that she was “a little surprised” that Americans knew so little about a war so important to their homeland, adding “They have their perspective and we have ours. It’s a question of emphasis: They emphasize their version of the story . . . and of course we emphasize ours.” But it is more than just a question of perspective, it is a matter of an important chapter in the life of a country that is all but forgotten.

Therefore, a goal of the book is to help promote awareness of the people, places, and events of the war during the bicentennial celebration of this “forgotten” conflict. The book tells the story of the heroes and villains of the war, discusses the war’s causes and consequences, and uncovers its role in shaping the continent’s history and forging a sense of nationalism among both Americans and Canadians. Relatedly, rather than explore a

single major battle or facet of the War of 1812, the following pages present the highlights and lowpoints of all the major theaters of the war, from America's repeated efforts to invade Canada and the colossal ineptitude in that theater of the war, to naval fights for the Great Lakes and on the open oceans, to raids in the "northwestern" territory and the ongoing Indian conflict, to the British invasions of the Chesapeake and Gulf Coast.

But one does not have to be a military historian to follow the battles. In an effort to bring the war and those who fought it to life, I made the difficult decision to remove details such as the name of every unit engaged in each battle and the specific types of weaponry used in hopes of enhancing the readability of the book. However, I included the names of the generals and figures on the casualty counts, troop strength, and topography for each battle. Therefore, every effort was made to produce an accessible, readable account of the war for a wide audience.

I would like to thank Michael Rinella, Jenn Bennett, Fran Keneston, and the staff at SUNY Press for their confidence in my initial proposal and manuscript, and their assistance in publishing this book. I have had the pleasure of publishing three other books with SUNY. University presses such as SUNY provide such rich cultural, literary, and scholarly contributions to society and I am always grateful for their work. Thanks also to my friends Steve West, Doris Davidoff, and Bob Terpstra for reading early drafts of this book and providing helpful feedback, and to my excellent student Mimi Trinh for generously digging up facts on some of the commanders of the war. Lastly and most importantly, I acknowledge my family—Claudia, Alessandro, and Isabella—for their support and patience during the many long days and nights I spent researching and writing this book.

I hope you enjoy the book and find it to be informative and exciting. I also encourage you to visit the many fun and helpful battlefield sites and Websites associated with the War of 1812.

Robert P. Watson
Boca Raton, Florida