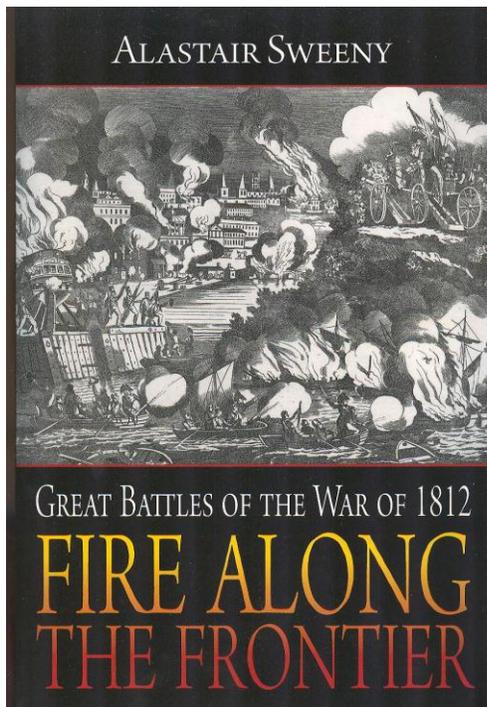


Response to Book Review of Fire Along the Frontier: Great Battles of the War of 1812

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Alistair Sweeny, the author of the book responds:

While I made a few minor errors in my book, noted in my Web site corrigendum, Major Grodzinski makes some comments in his review that I must challenge, apart from the misspelling of my first name and a juxtaposition of the book title.

First I had no intention of writing a "sober academic study of the war." While I possess a PhD, I do not work in the halls of academe, and I am also by nature a person who approaches things passionately rather than soberly.

Sober academic histories abound. In writing Fire Along the Frontier, I wanted to explore some new avenues of War of 1812 research, particularly in the role of commodities and finance. I

wanted to take some risks, suggesting some unpalatable truths about the conduct of the war on both sides of the border and in Europe. I wanted to break some new ground in the study of the war, as the western front of a world war, and Napoleon's last ditch effort to beat off the Royal Navy. I wanted to counter the dismal Jeffersonian spin on the war, which so many academics accept at face value. And being someone who makes a living from writing, and not from academic lecturing, I wanted to produce a book that was readable by the general public, and backed by a detailed and useful Web support site, here:

<http://alastairsweeny.com/1812>

Major Grodzinski digs up an old critique of my biography of Sir George-Etienne Cartier, Canada's first Minister of Militia, which describes my approach as "bankrupt" and my style as "breezy." He should realize that my book was shepherded into print by one of Canada's most prominent and accomplished historians, the late Prof W.L. Morton, author of eleven histories, Executive Editor of the 19 volume Canadian Centenary series, Chancellor of Trent University and president of the Canadian Historical Association. Dr. Morton went over my findings carefully, pronounced them correct and original, and graciously wrote a Forward to the book, describing it as "very much a life of Cartier, vivid, spirited and dramatic." Readers can judge for themselves, as I have put the book online here:

http://www.canadachannel.ca/cartier/index.php/Welcome_to_the_George-Etienne_Cartier_Portal

I have also recently published two business histories with Wiley, the first on Research in Motion and the BlackBerry, and the second on Canada's massive oil sands industry, both of which have been well reviewed, and the reviews are online.

Major Grodzinski complains of my decision to limit endnotes and a bibliography in my *Fire Along the Frontier* text, and put them online, where they can be hot linked. I believe this is an innovative approach that will become increasingly common as the growth of ebooks continues apace, and it was done with the blessing of the publisher. Indeed the Kindle and ePub versions of the book are searchable, and they let readers click directly to the references if they are online. The Web support site also lets readers follow a detailed timeline, and examine battles and events more closely, usually with links to original documents, external sites and a gallery of images, all of which are indexed and searchable. I also provide those interested with an "On this Day in War of 1812 History" feed.

I fail to see why Major Grodzinski feels I am rehashing old myths. I believe I have added some fresh perspectives on the war, particularly on the timing of the US declaration, American diplomacy vis a vis Napoleon, the issues of Spanish Florida and Mexico, the role of Astor and the North West Company, New England involvement in Britain's Baltic hemp trade, and the real reason why the French Emperor was forced to invade Russia. I am also proud of my work in establishing that, contrary to most opinions, and Jeffersonian spin, the war was primarily a conflict over commodities - hemp, iron and timber for the Royal Navy, and land for the War Hawks.

There remain many unexplored areas surrounding the War of 1812. I for one would like to know more about British involvement in Aaron Burr's scheme to create a northern nation (with the inclusion of British North America) in opposition to the Virginians. Of course Burr was Sir George Prevost's uncle by marriage. Did this have any bearing on his actions? Was this scheme still in play in 1812?

Some minor points:

- I believe Jean-Marc Prevost anglicized his name as "James" in the United States.
- Yes, Major Grodzinski is correct in noting that Sir George Prevost did in fact go west of Kingston, in 1813, to York, Burlington Bay, and the Niagara Frontier, and in 1814, to York.
- Major Grodzinski misquotes me, that I said Prevost was working toward “protecting the American cause.” I simply speculate, was this man "quietly damping down British and Canadian successes to benefit or protect the American cause, or his family's land holdings in New York State?" QED.
- I must assuredly did not say that Sir George Prevost died by his own hand, only that it would not surprise me if he did take that way out, to avoid the pain and stress of testifying at his own court martial.

I agree with Major Grodzinski that Sir George was an experienced staff officer; however, I contend that he was, like most peacetime desk officers, instantly out of his depth when the American bullets started to fly. On one occasion, he complained to Bathurst that he had no support or direction, yet was incapable of taking the lead himself.

Would Isaac Brock have made a better wartime Governor and Commander? In most ways, I would say, yes, but in other ways no. Certainly Prevost performed a valuable service in bringing the French Canadian political elite on side, yet his treatment of Charles-Michel de Salaberry was, to put it mildly, abominable.

I have already made a detailed response to Major Grodzinski in Inroads Magazine,

http://alastairsweeny.com/1812/index.php/A_Response_to_John_R._Grodzinski

So I will not belabour the points, except to say that in my opinion, pretty much every major contribution Sir George made to the war effort made things palpably worse for the British and Canadian cause. It seems that, outside his immediate coterie, most of Prevost's contemporaries held this opinion, from Isaac Brock's friends in Upper Canada (I quote a telling letter from William Dummer Powell), to the Rev. John Strachan and a large section of the officers in the field. Many reputable Canadian historians have come to much the same conclusion.

So Major Grodzinski has an uphill row to hoe in rehabilitating Sir George Prevost; however, it is clear that he has been doing a great deal of detailed research into his activities and management of the British war effort in North America. I see he is bringing out a volume with the University of Oklahoma Press, and I look forward to reading his conclusions on this fascinating subject.

Response from the Original Reviewer

I stand by my original review and have nothing further to add.