

McCavitt, John and Christopher T. George. *The Man Who Captured Washington: Major General Robert Ross and the War of 1812*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2016. 310 pages. \$30

Reviewed by Robert Burnham

The Duke of Wellington had 71 general officers who served as brigade commanders under his command during the Napoleonic Wars. Unlike those who commanded divisions, such as Robert Craufurd, Rowland Hill, Thomas Picton, and Thomas Graham, most of these junior generals faded into obscurity after 1815. One of the few exceptions was General Robert Ross, who gained fame and notoriety for capturing Washington, D.C. during the War of 1812 and the subsequent burning of the White House.¹ Until *The Man Who Captured Washington* was published, there has never been a full length biography of the general.

While *The Man Who Captured Washington* is a biography of Robert Ross, however only the first 40 pages of the narrative covers his life leading up to his appointment to command the forces that captured Washington. Those 40 pages are filled with details on his early life until he went to North America in 1814. He was quite well educated, having studied at Trinity College in Dublin and was an accomplished musician. He was surprisingly old when he was commissioned in the 25th Foot at the age of 23.² He advanced through the ranks to major which was typical for the time, but he seemed to have hit a plateau and had to wait 9 years before he was promoted to lieutenant colonel in his regiment.³ However after that he was promoted to colonel in two years and then to major general in 1813.

In addition to serving in Flanders in the 1790s and the Egyptian Expedition in 1801, Robert Ross was at Maida in 1806; the early days of the Peninsular War, including the retreat to

¹ In a move to commemorate the event on its 200th anniversary, the British Embassy to the U.S. had a special cake made with the likeness of the White House with lit sparklers on it. After posting a picture of the cake on its Twitter account, they apologized when some Americans took offense at their humor.

² The average age at commissioning for his contemporaries in Wellington's Peninsular Army was just under 16 years.

³ He was to receive a brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel in 1801 when he commanded an ad hoc battalion in the expedition to Egypt. However this promotion was honorary only and did not come with pay and privileges.

Corunna in 1808 – 1809; and the Walcheren Expedition in 1809. He returned to the Peninsula in early 1813. After being promoted to major general in June, he led the Fusilier Brigade of the 4th Division through the rest of the Peninsular War.

Not surprisingly, 80% of the narrative covers General Ross's career after the Peninsular War ended. In June 1814, he was given command of a brigade that was sent to North America as reinforcements that would hopefully defeat the Americans. While at sea he opened his secret orders and found that he would command the land forces that would be used in a series of raids in the Chesapeake Bay in an effort to divert American forces and attention from the U.S. border with Canada. His orders were a bit vague and he was given considerable latitude on how he was to accomplish them. The commander of the expedition was Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, who was seconded by Rear Admiral George Cockburn. General Ross landed in Maryland in 20 August and four days later defeated the ad hoc American forces at Bladensburg. That evening he captured the American capital and proceeded to burn government buildings and a few private homes. After evacuating the city the next day, he and his force returned to their ships and sailed further up the Chesapeake to attack Baltimore. They landed at North Point on 12 September and General Ross was mortally wounded by an American sharpshooter later in the day.

The Man Who Captured Washington provides a very a good account of the last weeks of Robert Ross's life. Three chapters are devoted to the landing in Maryland and the subsequent battle of Bladensburg, while another three look at the capture and burning of Washington. Much detail is given on his conflict with Admiral Cockburn on whether they should put the city to the torch and to what extent they should they burn it. Military convention at the time permitted him to do so, but he was reluctant to give the order. The authors also examine the steps he took to ensure that only government buildings were burned. The last two chapters look at the events surrounding his death – including a detailed description of his wound by the surgeon who treated him – and the impact of the capture of the nation's capital on the war. In the Epilogue, the author looks at how Robert Ross has been remembered and memorialized over the past 200 years.

The authors draw heavily on primary sources to bring General Ross to life. They were given access to Ross family papers and there are many excerpts from his letters, which provide insight on his personality and the family problems he had at the time. Additionally they quote extensively from numerous memoirs, diaries, and letters of the participants. These are not just those written by British Army and Royal Navy officers, but also from American soldiers, sailors, politicians, civilians, and even slaves! They were also able to obtain copies of the local

REVIEW - MCCAVITT, JOHN AND CHRISTOPHER T. GEORGE. THE MAN WHO CAPTURED WASHINGTON: MAJOR GENERAL ROBERT ROSS AND THE WAR OF 1812.

newspapers from Washington, Baltimore, and Alexandria which gives the readers a sense of how the news of the events were reported.

Throughout the narrative, Mr. McCavitt and Mr. George examine many of the myths that have arisen from the events surrounding the capture and burning of Washington. They confirm some and debunk others. These myths include why General Ross gave the orders to burn the buildings, the extent of the damage that was done to the city, and how many buildings were actually burned. They also examine whether President Madison ran away in panic during the battle of Bladensburg and whether General Ross's body was really preserved in rum!

The Man Who Captured Washington tells of a man who by the time he arrived in North America was tired of war and would rather had not gone on one last campaign. He was torn at fighting the Americans and although he captured the city, he was reluctant to order the burning of the government buildings. By the end of the book, the reader is left with a vivid portrait of Robert Ross, a man who did his duty, but never lost his humanity while doing it. Although the authors are obvious Ross partisans, they have provided a balanced portrayal of the man and the events that in which he was a key player. In addition to being impeccably researched, it is a well written and an enjoyable read. Given that the 200th anniversary of the capture of Washington just passed, it will be well received by both those with a strong interest in the War of 1812 and the general public who are looking for more information on why it was burned.

Robert Burnham