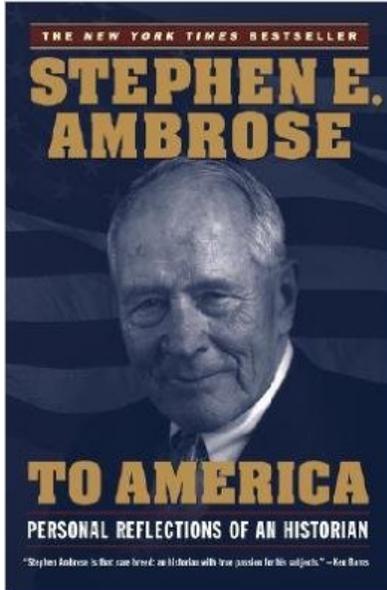


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Ambrose, Stephen E. *To America: Personal Reflections of an Historian*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 265 pages. ISBN: 0-7432-5212-8. Paperback. \$8



I recently came across this book on a bookshelf in a condo I was staying at on the beach. Having read the many books I had brought with me I decided to see if it would catch my interest. For those of you who may not be familiar with the author, he was probably the foremost popular American historian of the past 100 years. He wrote such military classics as *The Band of Brothers*,¹ *Pegasus Brigade: June 6, 1944*, *The Victors: Eisenhower and His Boys*, and *D-Day*. He also wrote biographies of Eisenhower, Nixon, and a joint biography of Crazy Horse and George Armstrong Custer. Possibly his most popular non-military book was *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. In addition to writing many books on World War II, he was also a consultant to Steven Spielberg for the movie *Saving Private Ryan*.

To America is not a history per se, but a collection of random essays on a variety of topics relating to American and world history. The first two are related to the Napoleonic Era and cover the men who were instrumental in American Revolution and setting up the new country. Much of the essay is about President Thomas Jefferson, who first served as the vice president and then the president from 1797 to 1809. Mr. Ambrose provides a no holds barred portrait of one of the great minds of the era -- showing his strengths and his weaknesses. The second chapter looks at the battle of New Orleans, which was the reason I started the book in the first place. It is an overview of the last land battle of the War of 1812 and told mostly from the perspective of General Andrew Jackson.

Other chapters include ones on building the Transcontinental Railroad after the Civil War, writing about Nixon, the Vietnam War, building the National D-Day Museum, and a curiously named essay called "War Stories: Crazy Horse and Custer and Pegasus Bridge". Another is called "Writing about Men in Action 1992 – 2001". In this essay he provides advice to someone who wants to write history books.

¹ Its full title is *The Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* and was made into a popular television mini-series in 2001.

“Hard work is the answer. You have to have an insatiable curiosity, be an avid reader, have a memory that allows you to retain what you have read. . . To be a good writer of American history you have to know what you are talking about. . . Keep your narration in chronological order, as that is the way it happened. Don’t anticipate. Don’t tell your reader what is going to happen by the end of the book. Keep your reader guessing, on the edge of the seat, which is just the way it was for Dwight Eisenhower on the morning of D-Day, 1944. . . Do your level best to avoid all words ending in ‘ly’. Leave out adjectives – as many as possible. Start your sentence or your paragraph, with a time and place clause – events happened here or there on this or that date. Never use the passive voice.”²

Stephen Ambrose died in 2002, the same year *To America* was published. He wrote 25 books, many of them best sellers. Although several of his books were biographies of some of the most notable figures in American History, his true passion was telling the stories of the common soldier in combat. In order to ensure that their story would be remembered for centuries to come, he was also instrumental in founding the National World War II Museum and donated \$2,000,000 of his royalties from *D-Day* to building it.

So why should the readers of the Napoleon Series read this book, since only about 10% of it covers the Napoleonic Era? There are several reasons. The first is because the author talks about the writing process: what it took to do the research to write the book and the people he met along the way. For example his motivation for writing *Pegasus Bridge* was a chance meeting with Major John Howard, when the author was touring Normandy. Major Howard was the commander of the British paratroopers who seized the bridge. He was also a friend of Major Hans von Luck, who led the Germans in the battle. Mr. Ambrose was the individual who convinced Major Luck to write his memoirs.

The second reason someone should read it is because he dissects many of the key events in American history and tells it from the viewpoint of those who lived the events. As he did for Thomas Jefferson, he does not pull any punches, showing the good and the bad that they did. Like his war stories, his essays do not just focus on the famous, but often on the all but forgotten people who made the events happened.

To America is a quick but very enjoyable read. Its thought-provoking essays will make the reader re-think what he thought he knew about American history.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: May 2016

² Pages 188 - 189