Historical fiction is a popular genre that presents historical events, with varying degrees of attention to historical detail, from the perspective of a fictional character. It can include counterfactual history, the “what ifs” had certain events not taken place, or alternate history, that diverges considerably from actual events. The majority of fictional works set during the War of 1812 occur on the high seas, as age-of-sail dramas set during the Napoleonic Wars can easily be adapted to include events from that conflict. A popular example includes three volumes of the Aubrey-Maturin series by Patrick O’Brian, that are set during the Anglo-America war.

1812: Rights of Passage is the first volume of what author Bert J. Hubinger hopes to be a trilogy set during the War of 1812. Hubinger is author of Sea Drums and Other Poems, a well-received collection of contemporary poetry, and several articles on the War of 1812.

The central character of this story is Nathan Jeffries, whose father William enjoyed a
distinguished career at sea. Living in Baltimore, young Nathan becomes caught up in the expanding maritime economic dispute between America, Great Britain and France; while at home, numerous forces—including a long standing personal dispute with an embittered rival—are conspiring against him. On the eve of the War of 1812, Nathan, who is serving on one of his father’s ships, faces danger from British privateers, the Royal Navy and other threats. Another plotline involves Nathan’s nemesis, who is at the western end of Lake Erie. Here, on the eve of the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe, the reader is introduced to the Shawnee leader Tecumseh and the struggle between Americans and natives for control of the Old Northwest, a topic that will likely continue in subsequent volumes of this series.

The story concludes with Nathan having been impressed and into the Royal Navy and serving aboard the British frigate Guerrière. In the weeks prior to the famous August 1812 encounter between that warship and USS Constitution, Nathan is able to turn against his captors—in that wonderful way that historical fiction can—and provides important intelligence to the Americans on the British warship. Before the two vessels meet, Nathan ponders the chances of an American victory in an engagement. Although he is fully aware of the condition of Guerrière—her masts are in poor condition and she is sailing for Halifax for “much needed repair” (p. 202)—that single frigate suddenly embodies the might of the Royal Navy. The emotive aspect of the moment appears reasonable, however, one would think our nautical hero was more capable of judging such matters.

There are a few quibbles with this book. Passages presenting the British as holding the market for deceit and cruelty are tiresome, and the context of their maritime economic policy, which
placed the United States squarely in the middle of a maritime economic war between Britain and France, lacks context. A departure from the storyline to describe President James Madison’s reflections of the potential dangers of a war with Britain is an unnecessary diversion from the main storyline. In this passage, set in early June 1812, Secretary of State James Monroe reminds Madison of former President Thomas Jefferson’s claim that “The acquisition of Canada … will be a mere matter of marching”\(^1\) (p. 183, and again on p. 184) However, this personal reflection, made in a letter to William Duane, was not written until early August 1812. Finally, the contracted spelling of nautical terminology as it is spoken, such as “bos’n” instead of bosun (p. 58), is perfectly fine usage for dialogue, but is hardly necessary for the main text.

Nonetheless, the characters are interesting and, in some cases, are well-developed. The intrigue and double-dealing by some is compelling and the passages on board ship are wonderfully executed. *1812: Rights of Passage* is a pleasant read and one hopes the remainder of the series will be as exciting. Indications are that the storylines developed thus far will continue and that the author will also explore counterfactual history.

The author of this review, Heneage Dundas, is a former naval person, who spends much of the year sailing the waters between Bermuda and the Caribbean. He has employed a *nom de plume*, as his identity may influence the reception of this review.

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