

Capital in Flames: The American Attack on York, 1813 By Robert Malcomson

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Capital in Flames: The American Attack on York, 1813

By Robert Malcomson. Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 2007. xxii + 489 pages. \$39.95 hardbound. ISBN 1-896941-53-2 (www.rbstudiobooks.com)

Robert Malcomson, author of two other War of 1812 volumes—on the naval war of Lake Ontario and on the battle of Queenston Heights—is a stickler for detail. This comprehensive volume on the American invasion of York is packed (but never padded) with particulars. Yet the specifics never overcrowd the author’s central purpose: tracing the full story of an event well dubbed “the most traumatic day in the history of Toronto.”

Capital in Flames is divided into four sections. The three chapters of “The Town and the War” describe York in 1812, the problems the British faced in defending Upper Canada, and the first year’s campaign for the control of Lake Ontario. The next four chapters, headed “Strategies and Armed Camps,” alternate between the two sides, describing British operations during the 1813 Upper Canadian winter, American goals of the second year of the War, fortifying York, and assembling the invasion force at Sackets Harbor. “The Battle” carries the narrative through advance planning, landing, taking the garrison and the ultimate capitulation. Malcomson consumes a full sixty-one pages leading readers through events of Tuesday April 27, the day of the attack. The most dramatic incident was the unexpected intensity of the explosion when the British deliberately torched their own powder magazine, killing dozens, mostly Americans. Nonetheless General Sheaffe quickly quit the field and fled the town, leaving surprised

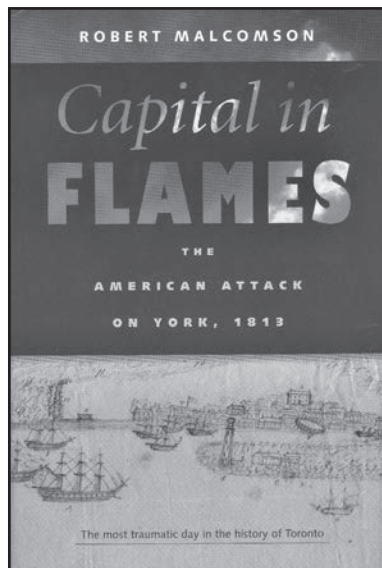
civilians to negotiate terms of surrender. The final section, “Repercussions,” has four more chapters on the occupation, the consequences of the campaign, the legacies of the battle, and what happened to York (including Fort York) afterwards.

For those who want more, there is much

more. Exhaustive endnotes (fifty-nine pages!) and a twelve-page bibliography combine to reveal the extent of Malcomson’s research into military records, government documents and personal papers. He sifted through unpublished records in twenty-two archives, particularly the national archives of the United States and Canada, and the Archives of Ontario. Nine appendices offer additional information, most specifically statistics on casualties and prisoners, as well as the names of all those recorded as military participants:

British regulars, militia, and American army and navy personnel. The volume opens with a *dramatis personae*, helpful to readers unfamiliar with the names of key characters.

Capital in Flames is more than a military history. Part of its importance is Malcomson’s careful consideration of civilian events such as John Strachan’s role in rallying York’s leadership, problems of coping with looting and vandalism by unpatriotic locals, and the deep resentment aroused in York’s citizenry by Sheaffe’s rapid retreat. The Americans were guilty of destroying some private as well as public property, but many residents were amazed that the Yankees freely distributed to the populace much of the



loot. They handed out captured British supplies, including agricultural implements and other goods that had been gathered and warehoused by Lieutenant Governor Simcoe but never dispersed to settlers.

Those interested in “myths” —soldiers crashing through the ice of Grenadier Pond, traditions of militia sacrifices and gallantry, captured supplies affecting the naval battle at Put In Bay on Lake Erie—will find much to ponder as Malcomson sifts the facts from the fantasies. Among the oft-debated questions he considers are who actually burned the Parliament buildings, what were the comparative strengths of the opposing forces, and how important was the whole affair in the ongoing war. Trivia buffs will delight in details of the scalp found in the Parliament building and of the death of U.S. General Pike with his Brock-like admonition to his troops: “Push on my brave fellows and avenge your general.”

Nonetheless, Malcomson is no debunker. His passion for accuracy does not mute his enthusiasm for the narrative. The whole affair was marked by myriad errors, miscalculations, and other evidences of human fallibility. Yet Malcomson is judicious without being judgmental, neither blaming nor scoffing as he presents the evidence. In the context of the entire War of 1812 (and, from a British perspective, the larger context of the Napoleonic wars) the American invasion of York may not have amounted to much, but, Malcomson insists, “the taking of a capital city is no small potatoes.” Despite major losses, for Americans the battle was significant and successful, being the first ever combined military operation of

the American army and navy. It had been executed with speed and precision, marred only by the totally unanticipated explosion. For Canadians, the defeat at York was not definitive. It influenced but in no way determined the course of a war that ended as it began, affirming and confirming the *status quo*. Malcomson begins and ends his book focusing on the town of York, but he rightly refrains from speculating on what might have been had the outcome of the war been different.

Once again Robin Brass Studio has published a work that is fully and accurately illustrated, artfully designed and a pleasure to read. Maps, in particular the hour-by-hour depictions of the progress of the battle, are clear and informative. Numerous archival images and modern photographs (many by Malcomson) enhance the written words throughout.

Here, at last, is a comprehensive, meticulously researched history of the battle of York. So much has been written that is shallow, biased and laden with legend. This brilliant book tells the whole story from both Canadian (i.e. British) and American points of view. It is basic reading, essential for understanding early Toronto as well as the War, and destined to become the definitive study of the subject.

Chris Raible, Creemore, Ontario

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Narrow Gauge Through the Bush

By Rod Clarke. Streetsville, Ontario: Privately published, 2007. 400 pages. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-9784406-0-2. (www.cvrco.com)

N*arrow Gauge Through the Bush* is an immense work of Ontario railroad history. Throughout more than 370 oversized pages, crammed with in-

formation, Clarke shows his deep commitment to highly detailed research. His subject is the Toronto, Grey & Bruce (TG&B) and the Toronto & Nipissing (T&N) Railways,