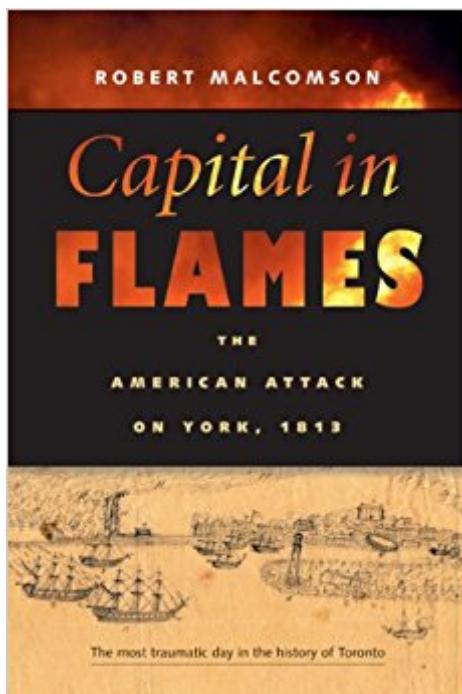


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Capital In Flames: The American Attack On York, 1813



Synopsis

As Canada's central depot and naval dockyard on the Great Lakes early in the War of 1812, the capital frontier town of York (present-day Toronto) was a prime target for American forces. In April 1813 a squadron of warships under U.S. Commodore Isaac Chauncey sailed up Lake Ontario and landed about 1,800 soldiers there as the renowned explorer Gen. Zebulon Pike led his men into battle. Though the Americans took the town, their victory proved disappointing. Malcomson challenges conventional ideas about the battle as he brings to life the politicians, soldiers, and citizens whose destinies clashed at York.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

ROBERT MALCOMSON, a resident of St. Catharines, Ontario, is a leading Canadian expert on the War of 1812. He is the author of numerous articles and two other books on the war.

This is truly an excellent book, and the one review with a single star rating obviously meant to give the book a five star rating. The book covers the American attack on Toronto, known as York at the time, in the War of 1812, but it is much more than that. Author Malcomson gives a very complete background of the conflict on the US/Canadian border, indeed from the Canadian side -- a factor that made the book even more interesting to me. Its scholarly coverage is evidenced by the fact that of the book's 489 pages, 158 are appendices, notes, etc. As usual in this war, there was much blundering and bravery on both sides. Each made extensive use of poorly trained militia, and the results were sometimes farcical. The Americans executed their first ever amphibious operation and it

was successful. A well-known military leader was lost, General Zebulon Pike, the man who gave his name to Pike's Peak in Colorado. The Canadians fought fiercely, if unevenly, and ultimately their capital of Upper Canada was burned by the Americans, although the expedition turned out to have little effect on the outcome of the war. On the other hand, the events were extremely important to the residents of York and environs. The writing is crisp and even exciting. Somehow the narrative does not flag in the details, and I found myself hoping that the York citizens would somehow pull a rabbit out of the hat and repel the invaders. However, the American naval strength was too great, and the British attention was focused on other theaters. Commodore Chauncey was extremely active in building up American naval power on Lake Ontario, and both General Dearborn on the American side and General Prevost on the British were guilty of blunders and ineptitude. I guess it really is true, the side that blunders least usually wins. The author also focused on the President of Upper Canada, Sir Roger Scheaffe, a name probably unknown to the vast majority of Americans. He was alternately active and slow, inept yet concerned. He was unable to put a proper defense together, and the loss of York was the result. Of course, President Madison was forced to fly from Washington, DC, when the British attacked, and that was the nation's capital. At any rate, I really recommend this book. It is a delightful read, and the reader will learn a great deal about the War of 1812 on the northern border as a result. One should even learn that Canadians did not want to become part of the US and fought hard against us as a result. I was struck with the similarities between the antagonists, pretty much as they all came from the same original stock, and in some ways it seemed rather like the American Civil War. Mostly the people in the interior were left to their own devices, and everything was more or less improvised on both sides. Oh well, Canada had to wait until Elizabeth II for their independence. Personally, I think they deserved better. This is a great book.

This is the best book on the United States attack and capture of York in Upper Canada in the War of 1812. Robert Malcomson was an outstanding historian on this war. Malcomson did meticulous research and his judgements and analysis are highly judicious. This book is very detailed and the definitive account of this event. If you are interested in this battle this is the book for you.

On April 27, 1813, a force of 1,800 American soldiers landed on the beaches west of the small Canadian town of York. After driving off the British troops sent piecemeal against them, the Americans captured the provincial capital of Upper Canada, which they occupied for nearly a week before withdrawing. Though viewed by the Americans as a modest success of their arms, as Robert

Malcolmson shows in this first-rate account of the incident, the battle and the occupation came to assume great significance for the inhabitants of what would become the modern metropolis of Toronto, as well as Canadians throughout the region. To that end, Malcolmson begins by describing the origins of the battle in the war being waged. For contemporary Americans the War of 1812 was supposed to provide them the opportunity to annex Canada to their union, yet their initial efforts ended ignominiously in failure. In response, the U.S. flooded the region with men and materiel seeking to reverse British gains. One tempting target was the town of York on Lake Ontario, which many believed was being expanded into a naval base for British forces. The British, however, changed their minds not long before the Americans launched their assault, believing the town to be exposed and indefensible from enemy attack. In this respect the American attack on York only served to validate that judgment, leaving the Americans' victory a limited one but not without consequences for the town's residents. Malcolmson recounts all of this in a book rich with detail about the context and events of the battle. Ultimately he singles out the British commander of the region, Sir Roger Sheaffe, for failing to provide the leadership his men needed, though Sheaffe's superior, Sir George Prevost, receives his share of blame for the disaster as well. Though Malcolmson's narrative seems on the verge of drowning the reader in details at times, for the most part his writing style engages the reader with a nice mixture of information colored by anecdote. It is a book unlikely to be bettered as a study of the battle of York, and should be the first source to which anyone interested in learning about it or its legacy should turn.

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