

The War of 1812 in Wisconsin: The Battle for Prairie du Chien

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The War of 1812 in Wisconsin: The Battle for Prairie du Chien, by Mary Elise Antoine. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2016. xiv, 287 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$28.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Patrick J. Jung is professor of history and anthropology at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. He is the author of *The Battle of Wisconsin Heights, 1832: Thunder on the Wisconsin* (2011), *The Black Hawk War of 1832* (2007), and "Lonely Sentinel: A Military History of Fort Madison, 1808-1813" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2016) and is working on a book on the history of the War of 1812 in the upper Mississippi River valley.

Of all the theaters of the War of 1812, the upper Mississippi valley undoubtedly has been the least researched. This is not surprising when one considers that it was the most peripheral theater in a war that occurred largely on the peripheries of both the United States and British Canada. Thus, Mary Elise Antoine's highly readable volume is a welcome addition to a growing body of historical literature concerning the conflict. Like all the theaters in the War of 1812, the upper Mississippi valley had its own dynamics and idiosyncrasies. The campaigns there provided a consistent series of victories (and occasional strokes of luck) for the British-Indian alliance and a succession of setbacks and failures for the United States. Antoine provides an excellent overview of the personalities and events on both sides that shaped the course and outcome of the war in the upper Mississippi valley.

The first four chapters examine the history of Prairie du Chien from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the eve of the war. Antoine's focus on Prairie du Chien is justified given that it was the great prize at the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin rivers that both Great Britain and the United States sought to possess during the War of 1812. Nevertheless, she does not neglect other areas of the upper Mississippi valley; she provides a thorough analysis of the region from St. Louis to the headwaters of the Mississippi. Also integral to the narrative is an examination of the western Great Lakes, particularly the geo-strategically important location of Mackinac Island. Decisions and events at that major fur trade entrepôt had a crucial impact on the conduct of the war to the west.

British Indian agent Robert Dickson of Prairie du Chien emerges as an important figure whose efforts to recruit Indian allies were a key element in Great Britain's success. Dickson's American counterpart, Nicolas Boilvin, had a far more difficult task; the Indian nations overwhelmingly sided with the British during the war, and Boilvin lacked the resources required to make the Indians American allies or even to guarantee their neutrality during the war. William Clark, the superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis, was intent on seizing Prairie du

Chien and led the 1814 expedition that established Fort Shelby at the settlement. However, the British commander at Mackinac Island, Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDouall, scuttled Clark's plans. McDouall organized a force composed of British regulars, Indian warriors, and French Canadian volunteers that ended the month-long American occupation of Prairie du Chien with a well-executed three-day siege.

Great Britain's Indian allies subsequently thwarted further attempts by U.S. forces to extend American military power into the Mississippi valley north of St. Louis. Those victories ensured that the wide arc of territory from Mackinac Island to the Sauk village of Saukenuk along the Mississippi remained under the control of the British-Indian alliance until the end of the conflict.

Despite this impressive accomplishment, diplomats in Europe opted in the 1814 Treaty of Ghent to return the region to the United States, an act that stunned McDouall and other British officers as well as their Indian associates. In the end, Great Britain abandoned its native allies to the whims of the United States and its aggressive program of territorial expansion. Antoine concludes with a sketch of Indian-white relations in the upper Mississippi valley from the war's conclusion in 1815 to the 1832 Black Hawk War, the conflict that finally extinguished Indian resistance in the region.

Antoine writes in a flowing prose that makes her book excellent for general readers and academics alike. Moreover, the narrative is not encumbered with excessive detail or opaque jargon. The illustrations are attractive, and the maps are particularly outstanding. Nevertheless, the book exhibits a few flaws. The discussion of Great Britain's native allies would have been stronger if the author had consulted the important secondary literature on British-Indian relations from 1783 to 1815; the works of Colin G. Calloway, Robert S. Allen, Richard White, and Timothy D. Willig in particular might have saved Antoine from a few embarrassing errors. For example, she refers to the Sauk leaders Black Hawk and Keokuk as "chiefs" (132, 215) when, in fact, neither man was born into a chiefly clan. Black Hawk was a war leader and band leader among his people; Keokuk's rise to leadership was principally due to his position as an orator among the Sauks.

These, however, are relatively minor criticisms; the research is strong, the writing graceful, and the story compelling. Antoine's book is a much-needed addition to what remains one of the least-known theaters of the War of 1812. Students of Wisconsin history as well as the larger region of the upper Mississippi Valley will find much that is new and useful in this book.