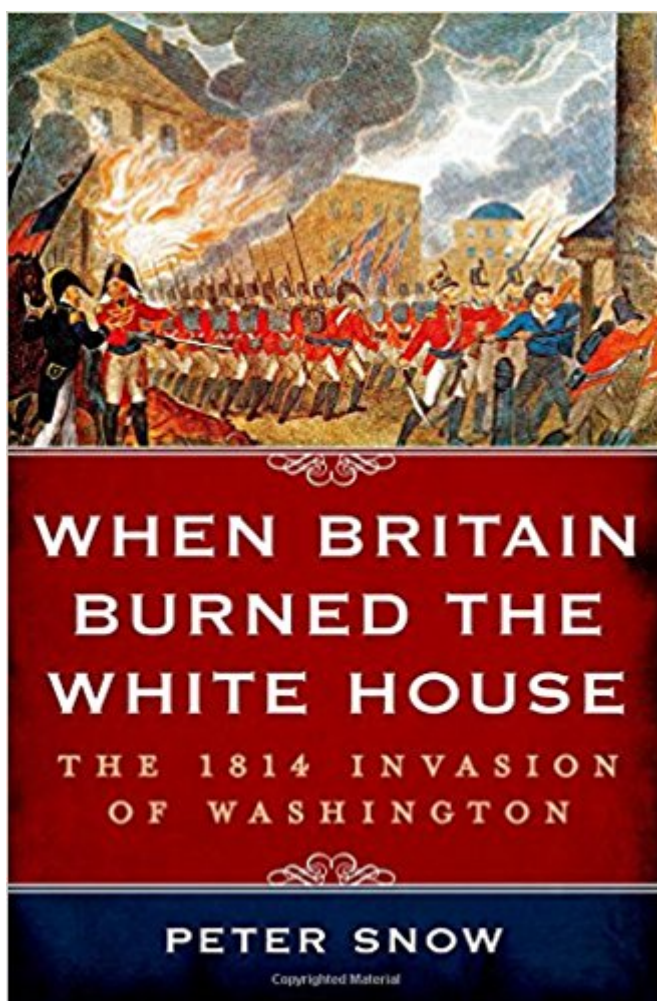


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When Britain Burned The White House: The 1814 Invasion Of Washington



Synopsis

In August 1814, the United States army was defeated just outside Washington, D.C., by the world's greatest military power. President James Madison and his wife had just enough time to flee the White House before the British invaders entered. British troops stopped to feast on the meal still sitting on the Madisons' dining-room table before setting the White House on fire. The extent of the destruction was massive; finished in wood rather than marble, everything inside the mansion was combustible. Only the outer stone walls would withstand the fire. The tide of the War of 1812 would quickly turn, however. Less than a month later, American troops would stand victorious at the Battle of Fort McHenry. Poet Francis Scott Key, struck by the sight of the American flag waving over Fort McHenry, jotted down the beginnings of a poem that would be set to music and become the U.S. national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner." In his compelling narrative style, Peter Snow recounts the fast-changing fortunes of that summer's extraordinary confrontations. Drawing from a wealth of material, including eyewitness accounts, Snow describes the colorful personalities on both sides of those spectacular events: including the beleaguered President James Madison and First Lady Dolley, American heroes such as Joshua Barney and Sam Smith, and flawed military leaders like Army Chief William Winder and War Secretary John Armstrong. On the British side, Snow re-creates the fiery Admiral George Cockburn, the cautious but immensely popular Major General Robert Ross, and sharp-eyed diarists James Scott and George Gleig. When Britain Burned the White House highlights this unparalleled moment in British and American history, the courageous, successful defense of Fort McHenry and the American triumph that would follow, and America's and Britain's decision to never again fight each other.

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Customer Reviews

“[An] excellent account” Snow, an experienced British journalist, has told the story of those engagements with brio and a fine gift for making sense of the complexities of battle a fine example of serious and literate popular history It ranks with Anthony S. Pitch’s fine “The Burning of Washington” (2000) as among the best accounts of a war that hardly deserves to be forgotten. “Snow’s narrative is authoritative and absorbing, his profiles sure and compelling, his judgments considered and fair, and his documentation most impressive. Wonderful for 19th-century political, military, and diplomatic history; specialists in Anglo-American relations; general readers; and all libraries. Library Journal, Starred Review “Never before has this story been told more fully or more engagingly, with greater empathy for both sides, or with greater balance” Snow dug deeply into records and reminiscences and, especially for the British side, brought the combatants, simple and august, alive. The pace is brisk, the characterizations sure, the judgments done with a light touch. The book distinguishes itself by rounding off the story of Washington with the subsequent Baltimore attack--both part of the larger British Chesapeake campaign. For the story of that campaign, this is now the narrative to read. “With ample quotes from English letters and diaries, Snow ably brings out the humanity of his subjects. “A well-done chronicle of an episode of the war that helped to shape the ‘special relationship’ between the U.S. and Britain. “Snow says “the clarity, humanity and wit of British and American men and women who were there bring the story alive as if it had happened today.’ He can take credit for bringing those attributes to the page. “Peter Snow’s account of this extraordinary event in British-American relations reads like a military thriller, each chapter raising the tension with a mass of detail and a kaleidoscope of characters who transform this book from what could have been a dry, chronological account into a riveting romp. . . . Snow adds an extra ingredient--a boyish enthusiasm for his subject . . . a meticulous and fascinating account. “Snow builds his account on the voices of those who fought and witnessed the campaign, from nervous U.S. militiamen to Ross, Cockburn, and Dolley Madison, the president’s resourceful wife. Written with verve and insight, this is a fitting reminder of a remarkable interlude in a war that deserves to be better known. “The result is superb. When Britain Burned the White

House is an exemplary work of history--lucid, witty, and humane, with terrific pace, and so evenhanded that it will surely be received as well in America as here. • The Spectator (UK)

PETER SNOW is a highly respected British journalist, author, and broadcaster. He was ITN's diplomatic and defence correspondent from 1966 to 1979 and presented Newsnight from 1980 to 1997. An indispensable part of election nights, he has also covered military matters on and off the world's battlefields for forty years. Peter is married and has six children.

Excellent presentation by Peter Snow of the War of 1812 that encompasses the burning of Washington and unsuccessful attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore three weeks later. Francis Scott Key would stand as a prisoner on the deck of a British ship witnessing the fort's 25 hour bombardment and ultimate survival with its flag still waving proud whereby inspiring his writing the words to the Star Spangled Banner that was officially adopted as the United States anthem in 1931. Snow narrates dynamics from the British point of view portraying the gentlemanly side of its British generals during the last major war between America and England. The Treaty of Ghent signed in 1815 would build a long-lasting alliance that has carried through to the modern era.

This book is well written which is not surprising given Peter Snow's background. It is well balanced and fair in coverage of both the US and British sides. Snow provides much material from memoirs of several participants. What surprised me is that he attributed some comments to General Ross allegedly made by him shortly before the Battle at North Point. Those comments have been questioned by some historians. He also failed to mention that at North Point the Americans had a second line of defense that they rallied to after the first line was overwhelmed by the British. Overall this is an excellent book.

Overall, I enjoyed this book. It is a well constructed account of an important historical event. That said, I'm always disappointed when I run across inaccuracies in a historical work. It makes me wonder how many other historical errors are in the book that the reader is supposed to accept as fact. Additionally, the book contains some grammatical constructions that had me scratching my head in utter amazement! I'm no historian, but I am an avid (and I hope fairly perceptive) reader. It undermines the credibility of both the author and the publisher when proofreading and fact checking are ignored or given short shrift. Let's also remember that the content of any book (regardless of the

format) is a product, and the reader/consumer has the right to expect quality for their dollars spent.

I really enjoyed this book. It moves along at a crisp pace without giving you the feeling you've been cheated on the history. Snow tells about the burning of the White House by the British and gives a bit of background of the War of 1812 as well as setting it within the proper historical context. I appreciated the even handedness of Snow's presentation. I enjoyed the perspectives of the people involved, including those on both sides who were not well known or 'lost to history'. I was entertained and educated and I recommend it to anyone who is interested in expanding their knowledge not only about this aspect of this particular war, but with also setting this into the proper historical perspective.

I liked this book. It was very entertaining and also very educational. I learned so much but yet it did not feel like a textbook. The author was honest and did an excellent job of just telling the story, no bias. This is one of the few books where I am truly sorry to finish, that I want to keep going. I had maybe an above average knowledge of the War of 1812 and this episode of burning Washington but I feel like I knew nothing now that I have read this. If you have an interest in this subject, I highly recommend this book.

To be honest I'm still reading this book but, so far, it is an even-handed, compelling if tragic recounting of this terrible event. Told from a British point of view, it is not kind to American military or political leadership and may be a bit over generous to the British military leadership. However, kudos are given to standout members of both sides countering scathing criticism of members of both sides. I'm anxious to finish and will update this review then.

Excellent

Peter Snow does a masterful job of linking together a wide range of 'real time' records of this complicated set of battles and in the process produces a very readable and informative story of this important conflict. I found this little book to be extremely helpful to me in placing this set of actions into the context of the times. I recommend it highly.

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