

1995

Merry Hearts Make Light Days: The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot edited by Donald E. Graves [Review]

Wesley B. Turner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Turner, Wesley B. "*Merry Hearts Make Light Days: The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot* edited by Donald E. Graves [Review]." *Canadian Military History* 4, 1 (1995)

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Canadian Military History* by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

tensions within the coalition, and the less than adequate abilities of the leaders at the top. (p.23) Ignoring for the moment that the proximity of large numbers of trigger-happy Germans may have had an impact on the course of the battle and the decisions taken by the high command, let me quickly summarize Blumenson's argument. Over a third of the book is devoted to context: outlining the major personalities involved, the Allied coalition from the top down (including lengthy discussions on Roosevelt and Churchill), the struggle for dominance within the alliance, the German defences and strategic plans as well as a summary of the course of war from 1939. This, he believes, is the necessary pretext for a series of errors that culminated in the campaign that, according to the title, should have "won the war."

His points follow in succession. The emphasis on moving into Germany as rapidly as possible instead of destroying the German forces in Normandy and the continued dispatch of formations to liberate Brittany are two examples used to illustrate the Allies' dependence on their preconceived plans and that no one at the top firmly grasped the reigns. Eisenhower, Montgomery and Bradley do not come off well in this account; Bradley, in particular, is Blumenson's whipping horse: insecure and ambivalent. While this is not new, the author's criticisms of Bradley have, in the past, been tempered with a recognition of the difficulties he faced. Patton emerges as the hero in this account and the unrecognized saviour of Allied fortunes. "No wonder Patton," he writes, "dreamed of being the Supreme Commander. He would take absolute hold of the operations and surround and destroy all the Germans in Normandy with resolution and finality." (p.223) Blumenson

speculates that an Eisenhower-Montgomery-Patton combination would have been more successful; his own quotes from Patton's correspondence make one wonder whether as an equal he would only have been as obnoxious to these men's faces as he was in his diary.

Written from the US perspective, the Canadians are, of course, given short shrift, although they can not escape the "everyone was to blame" tone of the book. Worse, he uses the unsubstantiated view that "residual tensions between" Crerar and Simonds" (p.183) influenced the Canadian military fortunes during this period. Although it fits nicely with his theme, it isn't true. Neither is his grasp of the Canadian part in the battle complete. He implies, for example, that it was after the pause on the morning of 8th, and "to get the endeavour (Totalize) started again" that Simonds ordered a second bombardment and the two inexperienced armoured divisions forward. (p.185)

Does any of this story sound vaguely familiar? It should; this is hardly an untold story. Blumenson has himself written two direct accounts of the battle ("General Bradley's Decision at Argentan" in *Command Decisions* and *Breakout and Pursuit*, two volumes of the Official History of the United States Army in World War II) and dealt with it in other works. Blumenson's previous efforts have not focused on personalities; rather, he limited himself to examining the operational possibilities and restrictions. He was also more balanced in his conclusions. His ire has risen with new evidence that more Germans escaped than he previously estimated.

Could the battle have won the war? No one can say for sure; a victory would certainly not have alleviated the Allies' supply problems. Indeed, in previous

battles the Germans had sustained greater losses and not crumbled; they were still fighting while the Russians pounded the bunkers in Berlin. Clearly, on the Allied side there was waffling at the top with regards to objectives and poor decisions (Bradley's order to Patton not to go on to Falaise and beyond to meet the Canadians) but clearly they were also wary of German counterattacks. The central point seems that with the fog of war, no one was sure whether the Germans were still in the pocket; as a result they wavered on whether to slam the door shut or focus on the Seine or both. Blumenson's account smacks far too much of hindsight. Similarly, the problem with examining the failures of the Allies and proposing better solutions is that it presumes the Germans would have gone along with the alternate plans proposed, stopped trying to fight their way out and given up. Nevertheless, the book is a good read and summarizes a lot of material, painting deft portraits of the Allied commanders; its story isn't untold but Blumenson tells it better than some.

Paul Dickson
University of Guelph

* * * * *

Merry Hearts Make Light Days

Donald Graves, ed. *Merry Hearts Make Light Days. The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot.*

In May of 1812 the brig *Ann* headed westward from England into the Atlantic carrying a number of British army officers towards Canada. The vessel encountered its first gale while they were at dinner, and a 17-year-old lieutenant described the resulting chaos: "The old brig was

rolling, gunwale under...the swinging lamp touched the ceiling planks. Away went seats, Soup, Mutton, dumplings, crockery, knives, forks, Mustard Pepper, Sauces....The Lady screamed...the Gentlemen shouted....All our chairs were broken, our table cloths cut, the Cook ill or sulky-obliged to cook for ourselves and to prepare our own Meals. Nor was this the worst, the rascal Sailors stole a considerable portion of our stock as we discovered. However, Merry hearts make light days!" (p.59) This last phrase became Lieutenant John Le Couteur's credo which he managed to maintain pretty consistently throughout his service in British North America during the War.

He was born on the Island of Jersey into a military family, fortunately, one that kept written records. *Merry Hearts* covers Le Couteur's life from his earliest memories through his boyhood military education and his periods of army service in British North America from June 1812 until December 1815 and again from 1816 to 1817. This journal was worked on in later life by Le Couteur who based it on a daily diary, memory, correspondence, official documents and his mother's diary. As well, correspondence is inserted (e.g. chapters 12, 14) and the account in chapter 4 of the winter march of Le Couteurs' regiment, the 104th Foot, from New Brunswick to Upper Canada in 1813, is taken from a text published in the *Canadian Defence Quarterly* rather than from the draft in Le Couteur's papers. In short, this publication originates not from a single document but from several sources.

Le Couteur joined his regiment in Saint John, New Brunswick in June 1812, marched with it to Upper Canada and served there until February 1815. He participated in the raid on Sackets Harbor, the battle of Lundy's Lane, the skirmish at

Conjocta Creek, the siege of Fort Erie including the assault of 15 August 1814, and the clash at Cook's Mills; he also witnessed the surrender of the Americans at Beaver Dams. His first-hand accounts of these actions, particularly at Sackets Harbor, Lundy's Lane and Fort Erie, convey the immediacy of battle but just as interesting are his reflections on leadership, his own emotions and the suffering of the men.

In the editor's words, "Le Couteur's war was a subaltern's war and a light infantryman's war," and so we see his experience "from the viewpoint of a junior officer." (p.18) rather than from that of field or high command. Being a well-born and well-educated officer, Le Couteur was able to move in the highest colonial civil and military circles, frequently attending balls and parties as well as occasionally dining with commanding officers from the army and navy, but he was not privy to higher military decisions nor informed about overall strategy. Although the journal provides snapshots of the hard life of the rank and file trooper, what it also makes clear—explicitly and implicitly—is the social chasm between officer and soldier. In short, this journal is a social document and not simply an account of military life and adventures.

Carleton University Press is to be congratulated for this first full publication of the journal, edited and with notes by Donald Graves, arguably the leading scholar currently writing about the War of 1812. He provides an informative Introduction and a profusion of endnotes which, among other things, explain the meanings of military terms and obscure words of the period, the cost of living, civilian and military income, literary allusions and the identities of many individuals. The well chosen illustrations include early nineteenth-century views of places where Le Couteur

served as well as some of his watercolours and sketches. The book's detailed bibliography and index give it the full range of scholarly apparatus which makes the absence of maps all the more surprising.

While *Merry Hearts* may be read as an exciting story of a young man risking his life far from home, it is much more. Besides students of the War of 1812 or of Canadian military history, the journal should interest a wider readership because it presents so many insights into other areas like the functioning of the British military in that period, military-civilian relationships, and pioneer conditions in Upper Canada.

Wesley B. Turner
Brock University

* * * * *

Red Coats & Grey Jackets

Donald E. Graves, *Red Coats & Grey Jackets: The Battle of Chippawa, 5 July 1814*, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994, 210 pages (paper), \$18.99.

In *Red Coats & Grey Jackets*, Donald Graves offers a detailed examination of the 5 July 1814 Battle of Chippawa. This British defeat has usually been ignored by Canadian writers but celebrated by Americans since it was one of the few land victories achieved by U.S. forces during the War of 1812. Graves first became involved with Chippawa in 1991 when a proposal was made to erect a commercial building on the battlesite. His research established that slain soldiers of both nations were buried there and this has helped preserve the field from further development. As part of the campaign of the Chippawa Battlefield Preservation Society, Graves has reproduced