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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

A Battle Glorious and Needless

Reviewed by Max Byrd

WINSTON GROOM HAS THAT MOST enviable gift in a writer, an instantly likable voice. He is unpretentious and intelligent, easygoing, casual, even Deep South folksy. When he explains that New Orleans is a town you leave either crying or drunk, or remarks that if the British had known more about Andrew Jackson they "might have worried some," you can almost hear the ice cubes tinkle against the julep glass. But readers of his nonfiction, works such as *A Storm in Flanders* (2002), as well as his novels—among others, *Forrest Gump* (1986)—know that he also possesses a remarkable historical imagination, sensitive at once to patterns and to personalities, and fully capable of bringing a neglected or half-forgotten moment bursting noisily back to life. That's exactly what he has done in this splendid resurrection of the Battle of New Orleans.

The War of 1812—"President Madison's War"—resulted from repeated British seizures of American merchant ships and sailors, British agitation of western Indian tribes against American settlers, and the unslaked ambition of congressional leaders such as Henry Clay to invade and annex the vast, snowy territory to the north. (You could

identify the "war hawk," drawled John Randolph of Virginia, by its monotonous cry, "Canada, Canada, Canada!")

Groom begins with a sketch of the new American nation in the early 19th century—eight million strong, an "unwieldy economic giant"—and a brief account of the war's largely disastrous progress for the American side. Madison's War was no mere skirmish. By late 1814, the British had marched through Washington and burned the White House and the Capitol. In New England, where, because of the massive disruption of trade, the war was exceedingly unpopular, the Hartford Convention was furiously debating secession from the Union. And though British and American delegates had sat down together in Ghent, Belgium, to negotiate a peace, out on the open sea an armada of troop-laden British ships was steadily making its way toward what Groom calls "America's crown jewel of the West," the city of New Orleans.

He makes very clear what was at stake: Once New Orleans was conquered, it seemed likely that the British would demand a huge

PATRIOTIC FIRE:
Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans.

By Winston Groom.
Knopf, 292 pages. \$26



Brilliant leadership at the Battle of New Orleans propelled General Andrew Jackson all the way to the White House.

stretch of American territory as a condition for peace, and quite possibly “declare the Louisiana Purchase void and plant the Union Jack in that priceless territory, comprising all of the American land west of the Mississippi—an area larger than the United States itself prior to the purchase.” The fall of New Orleans, Henry Adams later observed, would have been “the signal for a general demand that Madison should resign.”

From this wide-scale backdrop, Groom rapidly narrows his focus to the two larger-than-life figures of his title: General Andrew Jackson of Tennessee and the genial pirate king of the Gulf of Mexico’s Baratavia Bay, Jean Laffite. These are Homeric characters. The 47-year-old Jackson, a man of enormous and vivifying hatreds, can serve as anybody’s Achilles. He is to all appearances little more than an amateur, untutored in military science or much else, but full of wrath against the English, who had imprisoned and orphaned him in the Revolutionary War. There are few images more stirring in American history than the ailing but indomitable Jackson, cigar clenched between his teeth,

striding up and down the improvised mud ramps parts his ragtag “Dirty Shirt” soldiers had built in the plantation fields south of New Orleans in hopes of repelling the British army. The novelist Groom does as well as anyone at capturing the swirling contradictions and energies of Jackson’s nature: one moment, charming the governor’s wife in a polished drawing room, and the next, hammering his fist on a table and thundering, “By the eternal, they shall not sleep on our soil!”

Against Jackson’s broad and unmistakable passions, history, the Muse of Opposites, placed the Creole Odysseus, Laffite. Groom is especially good on this mysterious and romantic figure, who was probably born at Port-au-Prince in what is now Haiti and who followed a winding path as privateer, gambler, and smuggler to the marshy island world of the Mississippi delta, close by New Orleans. In his early thirties at the time, he was younger than Jackson, subtle and given to disguises, handsome, “‘well made,’ in the parlance of the day—with a physical comportment something like that of a large, powerful cat.” Although the British offered money and rank if he would aid in their attack, Laffite spurned them and instead put himself, his men, and his extensive arsenal of weapons and gunpowder at the Americans’ disposal. Jackson, who had a prudish streak, at first demurred (the pirates were “hellish banditi”), but soon changed his mind.

Stage set, actors in place, Groom proceeds to the core of his book, a long, thrilling, almost day-by-day narrative of the battle. Little here is original, but everything is extremely well done. He begins by looking over the shoulder of the British fleet as it sails across the Gulf of Mexico in mid-December 1814, more than 60 vessels, eventually about 14,000 men. So massive a war machine will find it cumbersome to land and work its way north through the endless green spider’s web of bayous, creeks, and canals that lies between the Louisiana coast and New Orleans itself. But the British, driven by visions of plunder (their password was said to be “beauty and booty”), make a foothold at a desolate, mosquito- and alligator-

infested bog called Lake Borgne. And from there, they slowly advance to the Villeré Plantation, about eight miles below the city, directly in front of Jackson's line of defense—while Jackson struggles to arm and deploy his troops.

Writing about battle requires high literary skill—there must be clarity, energy, constant vivid physical action. Groom has a wonderful eye for detail. Here is Laffite's odd cutthroat brother Dominique You beside his cannon: "squat, smiling his perpetual grin, his neck thick as a tortoise, and smoking a cigar." Groom understands when to pause for readers to catch their breath, or to build suspense. He makes full use of primary sources, particularly the numerous British diaries that have survived. He has a moving empathy for the soldiers on the eve of combat: "As to the emotions a man feels on confronting an enemy, one whom he will actually *see* at any moment, there is no known expression in the English language; his mind can only work through an abstract collage of uncertain thoughts. This morning the men stood or squatted, honing knives, cleaning weapons, . . . or dreaming restlessly of violence."

The climactic moment arrives on Sunday morning, January 8, 1815. While the church bells are still ringing in New Orleans, some 5,300 sea-

soned British veterans march forward in columns, ramrod straight, drums beating, against some 4,500 entrenched Americans: militia, volunteers, Choctaws, men of color, Tennessee and Kentucky sharpshooters. When Winston Groom's brilliant account is over, 2,036 British soldiers have been killed or wounded, and three British generals lie dead on the field. Jackson's casualties are an astonishing eight killed, 13 wounded.

It was a battle, historians always note, that need never have been fought—on Christmas Eve, some 5,000 miles away, the British and American commissioners had already signed the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812. But no one in North America would know that for another six weeks. Meanwhile, the Battle of New Orleans had already begun to take its place, in Groom's words, as "a defining event of the American 19th century." It put an end forever to British territorial designs in the United States. It solidified, for a time, the faltering Union. And it launched Andrew Jackson and his un-Jeffersonian brand of populist democracy straight toward the White House, which would soon enough be rebuilt from its ashes and receive him as the seventh president.

■ MAX BYRD, a professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Davis, is the author of the historical novel *Jackson* (1997), as well as *Jefferson* (1993), *Grant* (2000), and *Shooting the Sun* (2004).

Benumbed by Joy

Reviewed by Florence King

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE AN AUTHORITATIVE, well-documented Grand Guignol horror story. If you've ever wondered about the source of those big, ecstatic American smiles or the frantically cheery commands to "have a nice day" that have become an inescapable part of our national life, read this riveting book and wonder no more. Chances are that the perpetrators of the friendly fire are zonked out on antidepressants, floating on magnetic clouds of alternative medicine, or overexercised into a state of eupho-

ria. All three instrumentalities have a common goal of "artificial happiness"—happiness as an end in itself, an induced emotion with no connection to the facts of one's life.

An M.D. who is still a practicing anesthesiologist, Ronald W. Dworkin is also a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute with a Ph.D. in political philosophy—that rarity, the doctor-as-intellectual who's

ARTIFICIAL HAPPINESS:

The Dark Side of the New Happy Class.

By Ronald W. Dworkin.
Carroll & Graf.
343 pp. \$24.95