BOOK REVIEW

Groom Offers His Version of the Battle of New Orleans

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For the first time ever, two new history books with Laffite in the title are in the bookstores this May: one is the paperback edition of William C. Davis' *The Pirates Laffite, the Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf*. The other, surprisingly, is *Patriotic Fire, Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans* by Winston Groom, famous for his *Forrest Gump* literary creation. Davis' book is by far the better history, built on years of solid, painstaking research in myriad archives. *Patriotic Fire*, however, is more of a popular history, much leaner in both page number and depth of detail, and there is absolutely no new research to be found in it. In style, it is like a gently novelized amalgamation of Latour's history, Walker's *Jackson and New Orleans*, and the British accounts by Gleig and Cooke, among others.

Groom seems to have wanted to spark a controversy with his Battle of New Orleans account, as he chose to quote from the *Journal of Jean Laffite* among the many books he read to compile this condensed opus about the joint efforts of Old Hickory and Laffite at Chalmette. In the notes chapter at the end of the book, even though he acknowledges the history of the dispute over the Laffite Journal's authenticity, Groom says he incorporated it for the simple reason that many other historians such as Robert Remini, Dr. Jane de Grummond, and Stanley Clisby Arthur had used that material, too. He says it is a case of deductive logic, that "as of right now, they (the Journal and associated collection) cannot be proved or disproved." I would add here that author H.W. Brands also stated in his book, *Andrew Jackson, His Life and Times* (2005) that he considered the Laffite Journal to be "probably authentic, although the provenance is sketchy." In response to my recent letter to him, Groom replied that he has his own doubts about the provenance of the Laffite Journal, but he thinks it "might very probably be authentic." He told me he had already written *Patriotic Fire* and was reviewing its galleys before he saw Davis' thoroughly researched *The Pirates Laffite*. He is still sticking by his opinion about the Laffite Journal (and without even seeing it). He did have what he recalled as a very long telephone conversation with Dr. Robert Schaadt of the Sam Houston Regional Library about the Laffite Journal collection. Because he depended on the Laffite Journal and unreliable folklore sources, Groom stokes the fire of the Laffite legend anew, starting with Laffite's use of the blacksmith shop as a smuggling front! And because he didn't look at the original sources at the archives, he didn't notice the errors regarding some files, like the one for the Sept. 10, 1814 letter which Pierre Laffite, not Jean, wrote to Gov. Claiborne. Pierre is mentioned in Groom's book, but only in scattered instances, most notably during the jail escape.

Groom's book started out promisingly enough, with the introductory revelation that through family papers he had discovered his great-great-great-grandfather, Elijah Montgomery, was a member of the 7th Regiment with Gen. Jackson, and most interesting, was personally promoted to major by Jackson on Jan. 8, 1815. Jackson noted Montgomery's "gallant conduct" in official dispatches of the day. Then he went on to say that his illustrious ancestor must have met Jean Laffite and his pirates at the battlefield. I thought, great, it looks like Groom did some genealogical studies and uncovered a
new viewpoint of the Battle of New Orleans, but alas, the prologue is where this tantalizing tidbit ended. The rest is basically a well-tied together summative rehash of most of the prominent historical books and booklets done about the Battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson, and Jean Laffite since that day at Chalmette. *Patriotic Fire* does have its good points, however, and these come when Groom steps away from synthesis and summation to interpret the history he reports. He gives credit to Laffite for performing a "valuable and patriotic service when he might just as easily have sailed out of danger as a very wealthy man." He even states that Laffite "and the Baratarian cannoneers contributions to the American victory were substantial, if not crucial." Furthermore, Groom outlines the dire consequences of what would have happened if the British had won at Chalmette: he says it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to dislodge them, especially if their fleet with their heavy guns could be sailed upriver on the Mississippi.

His most interesting observation, however, is how a sequence of events set in motion so much in history related to the Battle of New Orleans: first Tecumseh came to Alabama, then William Weatherford went on the warpath. Andrew Jackson stopped Weatherford and his followers with the Creek Indian War victory, which led to Jackson's commission as major general in the United States Army and his defense duty at New Orleans. Jackson's victory at New Orleans and the fervor of patriotism that followed him led to his winning the presidency as the first populist president. He became the father of the modern Democratic party. But, Jackson also became infamous for ordering the Indian Removal Bill, which resulted in the Cherokees being force-marched to what is now Oklahoma. All in all, if you can accept the book's shortcomings in terms of hands-on research, it is a good summation of the Battle of New Orleans and the key players in it. *Patriotic Fire, Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans* by Winston Groom and published by Knopf, is listed at $26.00. There are 8 pages of photographs and three maps.