BOOK REVIEW


The British at the Gates is one of a number of recent books about the Battle of New Orleans which use eye-witness accounts from British sources, integrated with material concerning political, social and economic conditions in lower Louisiana at the time of the British invasion. Mr. Reilly has skillfully interwoven the main characters' motivations, accurately accounting for how these motivations led to victory or defeat. Though the British Lt. Gen. Keane is generally chosen as the scapegoat for not attacking Jackson's forces early on in the battle, it was actually Maj. Gen. Packenham's mistake that lost the campaign for the British. The author claims that Packenham had an opportunity to strike Jackson's weak left flank, but refrained from attacking for three days while awaiting the arrival of heavy artillery. Jackson, in the meantime, completed strengthening his defenses.

Much of Reilly's information on the British army's situation at New Orleans comes from the journal of a young English soldier, George Robert Gleig, who was a keen observer.

The author of The British at the Gates researched the American side of the battle just as thoroughly as the British. Jean Laffite's role in the campaign receives very thorough treatment. Careful analysis is offered on just how the brothers Laffite developed their smuggling business. Relying on the published Journal of Jean Laffite for some information, Mr. Reilly is nonetheless skeptical of some anecdotes in the alleged memoir. He doubts that Jean Laffite immediately made up his mind to side with the United States; Reilly realizes that the Baratarians threw in their lot with the Americans simply because it was in their best interests to do so. Much of this book's conjecture concerning the independent attitude of Jean Laffite makes sense in the light of Laffite's precarious position on the eve of the British invasion.

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