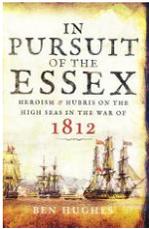


***Mad for Glory: A Heart of Darkness in the War of 1812.* By Robert Booth. (Thomaston ME: Tilbury House, 2015, 244 pages. Notes, illustrations, sources, index. Hardcover, \$24.95.)**



***In Pursuit of the Essex: A Tale of Heroism and Hubris in the War of 1812.* By Ben Hughes. (Barnsley UK: Pen & Sword Maritime, 2016, 255 pages. Notes, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. Hardcover, £25.00.)**

Reviewed by Gary M. Gibson

At the time of the War of 1812, for the United States government the Pacific Ocean might as well be on the back side of the moon. In South America, leading citizens in Chile were demanding independence from their Spanish colonial masters. The American State Department, however, under Secretary of State James Monroe, focused on the ongoing war with Great Britain and paid little attention to South America.

This changed in the fall of 1812 when the 32-gun frigate *Essex*, commanded by Captain David Porter, sailed for the South Atlantic to join Commodore William Bainbridge's squadron to prey on British merchantmen. Unable to find Bainbridge, Porter, without orders, took the *Essex* around Cape Horn and into the Pacific Ocean. His target was the British whaling fleet. In 1812, whale oil was a valuable commodity. Burned in lamps, it gave the brightest and cleanest light available. Porter hoped that by eliminating the British whaling fleet in the Pacific he would achieve both public fame, prize money and recognition by the Navy Department.

In 1812, the highest rank in the United States Navy was captain, a rank Porter had already achieved. Too junior to be considered for squadron command and the honorific title of commodore, Porter hoped to make a name for himself by doing something dramatic, and he chose to do that in the Pacific. Porter was not alone. Navy captains like

Bainbridge and Decatur on the Atlantic or Chauncey on the Great Lakes, also sought fame and fortune throughout the war.

Between February 1813 and March 1814, Porter and the *Essex* roamed the Pacific, capturing numerous British whalers and even annexing Pacific islands in the name of the United States. His efforts, however, did not go unnoticed in London. Royal Navy Captain James Hillyar and a small squadron was dispatched to the west coast of South America to put a stop to the *Essex*'s depredations. On 27 March 1814, Hillyar and two of his vessels, the 38-gun frigate *Phoebe* and the 18-gun ship-sloop *Cherub*, defeated and captured the *Essex* in the Chilean port of Valparaiso.

Dejected at his defeat, Porter was surprised on his return to New York to be hailed as a hero. He achieved a measure of fame, but that all his prize whalers were lost or recaptured by the British was conveniently overlooked.

Both Booth and Hughes describe these events in considerable detail, but from distinctly different perspectives. Hughes' work ("*Pursuit*") is the more even-handed and objective of the two. The chapters in *Pursuit* shift from the activities of Porter and the *Essex*, to Hillyar and the *Phoebe*, and back again, each covering roughly the same period of time. Porter's interactions with (and occasionally against) the natives he encounters on the various Pacific Islands are addressed objectively, recognizing that treating native peoples as uncivilized savages was common and acceptable in that era. *Pursuit* addresses the revolutionary activities in Chile only briefly as they had only a small part to play in the *Essex* story. Hughes favors the British perspective as much as he does the American, giving a balanced picture of events. *Pursuit* contains maps (lacking in *Glory*) making the *Essex*'s operations much easier to understand.

Booth's work ("*Glory*") is a different matter. On the plus side, *Glory* focuses on the revolutionary events in Chile that had an effect on the *Essex*'s operations and played a part in her defeat by *Phoebe* and *Cherub*. The major problem with Booth's work is his lack of objectivity when it comes to Porter. You cannot finish the Prologue in *Glory* before you find Porter described as a "ruthless buccaneer," "bent on a private mission of wealth and glory." While there is some justification for Porter's independence straining

the limits of naval practice, the theme that Porter operated as a “loose cannon” on the Pacific pervades *Glory*. Booth also focuses on a third player in the drama. American Consul General Joel Roberts Poinsett’s efforts to help the Chilean revolutionaries achieve independence from Spain, even to the point of becoming a general in the revolutionary army, are presented in great detail. While an interesting description of military and political activities in Chile in the 1813-1814 period, they have little to do with the *Essex* and *Phoebe*.

Overall, both works have merit, but *Pursuit* is the more valuable of the two from a naval perspective. *Glory* presents Porter’s activities and motives in a very negative way but some of that criticism is justified. *Pursuit* presents a more balanced picture of Porter, as well as providing more detail on Hillyar and the *Phoebe*. If you have to choose one, choose Hughes’ *Pursuit*.