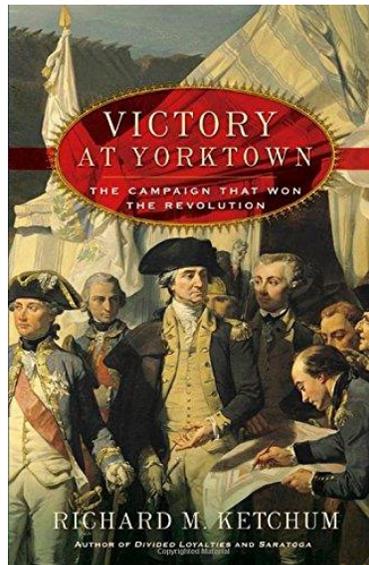


## BOOKS IN REVIEW



### *Victory at Yorktown* *The Campaign that Won the Revolution*

By Richard M. Ketchum  
Henry Holt and Co  
368 pages

#### Review by Joe Wagner

The previous books from Richard Ketchum dealing with the Revolutionary War, including *The Winter Soldiers* and *Saratoga*, demonstrated that he knows his material and can tell a compelling story. This leads to a well founded hope for another good read in this latest effort, but 'twas not to be. *Victory at Yorktown* is a mixed bag, offering some new insights and conclusions, but the writing is so sloppy and poorly edited that the total experience is one of disappointment.

On the plus side, as part of the background of the story, Ketchum builds an insightful picture of Washington, which lets us see him as a human being. From a French officer; “His face is often grave or serious but never stern. He is affable and converses with his officers familiarly and gaily.” From Thomas Jefferson; “I never heard (Washington) speak ten minutes at a time, nor to any but the main point which was to decide the question . . . knowing that the little ones would follow of themselves.”

Ketchum also adds some new perspective to events leading to the Yorktown campaign. This new information appears to be based on a thorough research of diaries and reports from the French forces in America commanded by Rochambeau. In the summer of 1780, the French arrived in New England, and how to use them became one of Washington’s primary decisions. Rochambeau’s written instructions specifically stated that he and the French forces were under the command of General Washington. What was not written, and which is part of the apparently new material revealed in this book, is that Rochambeau was given the final decision-making authority by the French government as to disposition and actions of the French Army. It is well-

known that Washington longed to capture New York, the principal British base in America. He suggested this action to Rochambeau as the best use of the French forces. While Rochambeau equivocated and agreed to try to work out such a plan, in fact he never intended to attack New York, and constantly worked to divert Washington and the Americans in another direction – the south. As it turned out, the decision to move the allied armies south in 1781, and not to attack New York, were foregone conclusions to the French. Once the French fleet sailed for North America in the spring of 1781, and Washington was trying to develop an attack on New York, Rochambeau had already sent direct instructions to Admiral deGrasse to come to the Chesapeake – not New York, for the campaign of 1781. Washington finally conceded to the French plan and gave up his New York campaign, which led directly to the war-ending victory at Yorktown.

Despite these and many other good things, including a fine review of the southern campaign of Gen. Greene et al, the book is seriously marred by terrible editing and factual errors, especially toward the end. It is particularly frustrating that the build-up in 80% of the book which is well done leads to the most important 20% at the end which is completely disappointing. It seems as if Ketchum was up against a deadline, and simply rushed the final chapters without rewrites or editing. An example is his treatment of the Redoubts 9 and 10 attacks. He mentions it almost in passing when discussing the French troops, goes back later and mentions it in another context, but never describes the action in a complete and meaningful way. Since it was the only major engagement of the siege, and the only offensive action of the allied forces, it certainly deserved something better.

This is an OK book for background on Yorktown, but not much for a comprehensive understanding of the battle itself.