



Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820

Robert J. Allison

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Born to a prominent Philadelphia family in 1779, Stephen Decatur at age twenty-five became the youngest man ever to serve as a captain in the U.S. Navy. His intrepid heroism, leadership, and devotion to duty made him a perfect symbol of the aspirations of the growing nation. Leading men to victory in Tripoli, the War of 1812, and the Algerian war of 1815, and coining the phrase "Our country, right or wrong," Decatur created an enduring legend of bravery, celebrated in poetry, song, paintings, and the naming of dozens of towns -- from Georgia to Alabama to Illinois.

After the War of 1812, Decatur moved to Washington to help direct naval policy. His close friendships with James Madison, John Quincy Adams, and other political leaders soon made him a rising star in national politics. He and his wife Susan made their elegant home on Lafayette Square near the White House a center of Washington society. The capital and the entire nation were shocked in 1820 when Decatur died at the age of forty-one in a duel with a rival navy captain.

In this carefully researched and well-written biography, historian Robert Allison tells the story of Decatur's eventful life at a time when the young republic was developing its own identity -- when the American people were deciding what kind of nation they would become. Although he died prematurely, Decatur played a significant role in the shaping of that national identity.

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