

Sir George Prevost: Defender of Canada in the War of 1812

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Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, 1767-1816

Early 19th century oil on canvas portrait by Jean-Baptiste Roy-Audy (1778- c.1848). After an original miniature by Robert Field (c 1769–1816) painted while Prevost was lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia. Miniature held by the McCord Museum, Montréal and published with permission.

Between September 1811 and March 1815, Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost was Captain General and Governor-in-Chief of British North America. In that time, he prepared this group of colonies for war against the United States, and when the War of 1812 began in June 1812, Prevost became responsible for defending a territory that stretched as far as Paris did from Moscow and he eventually commanded one of the largest overseas forces employed by Britain during the Napoleonic War. By December 1814, the strength of the British Army in the Canadas included 30,000 British regular and provincial troops, several thousand embodied militia, and the most powerful naval force ever assembled by Britain on the Great Lakes.

The historiography of the War of 1812 rarely attributes the success of British efforts in the northern theatre to Sir George Prevost; instead, others receive credit, such as Major-General Isaac Brock, Commodore Sir James Yeo, and a host of lieutenant-colonels and more junior officers that led several tactical actions. Prevost was not in the thick of each battle, nor was he expected to be. Prevost was appointed by the British government to lead its war effort in the

Canadas, a point that is often forgotten, and as a result, historians have effectively written Prevost out of the narrative. Much attention has been paid to the more colourful tactical aspects of the conflict at the expense of strategic considerations. Prevost, not Brock or Yeo or anyone else for that matter, held ultimate responsibility for winning or losing the war in North America. Prevost directed the operational and logistical activities of the Royal Navy (qualify that), the army, the Commissariat, and other branches of the military and civil establishment towards a single goal: the defence of the British provinces in Canada. This Prevost achieved through the judicious employment of the forces under his command and by not creating a situation whereby he would require considerable augmentation from home to restore it.

Prevost was able to study the problems inherent in defending British North America for several years before moving to Quebec. As lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia and the commander-in-chief of the forces in the Maritime Provinces, he learned that the security of the province was dependent upon the Royal Navy. He was also faced with the need to make the best use of limited army resources that were slowly reallocated to the Iberian Peninsula. To compensate for these losses, Prevost looked within the colonies, improved the militia and created provincial forces, an approach he would repeat in the Canadas. His defensive preparations included the active pursuit of intelligence on American intentions, in which he learned much about the American political landscape and of its political, economic and military strengths and weaknesses. By the time he was posted to Quebec, Prevost already had a good appreciation of the challenges of defending North American colonies and of his potential enemy, the United States of America.

Prevost made good use of his time to prepare the Canadas for war, for much had to be achieved over a short period. His efforts in securing fiscal aid, general support of the French-Canadian population (or at least with those *Canadiens* who held power and authority), improvements to the Lower Canadian militia, the raising of several provincial corps, improvements to the Provincial Marine and the construction of additional vessels meant that by June 1812, the Canadas were better prepared for war they had been at any other point in the crisis in Anglo-American relations. While the historiography of the War of 1812 acknowledges Prevost's success in working with French Canadians, it has forgotten that he also remained sensitive to the population in Upper Canada. He strove to ensure that the population of the upper province remained confident in the provincial commander and head of the civil government (including seeking new general officers for this post), while seeking to limit the frequency and severity of martial law, the imposition of which would invariably create much unrest.

Prevost surveyed the defences of the Canadas and his outline plan for their defence was approved by his superiors. Prevost was instructed by the Prince Regent, acting on behalf of the George III, who was ill, to defend the colony without creating the need for extensive military or fiscal assistance. The government believed such a strategy was possible by restricting Prevost's authority to undertake offensive action against the United States so as not to give any cause to unite fractured American support for the war. That effectiveness and conduct of that defence was dependent upon American actions; if they mobilized their resources with efficiency and launched a determined attack, they would most certainly overwhelm the defenders, forcing them to trade space for time. Upper Canada most likely would be abandoned as the surviving British forces sought protection from the only truly fortified post in the colony, at Quebec, where they would await, hopefully for massive reinforcements from Britain. If however, the Americans proved less effective in executing a coordinated series of blows, Prevost was confident the defences in both

provinces would hold against piecemeal attacks. For Prevost to say that it might prove necessary to retire to Quebec did not mean that it would inevitably occur; it was actually a reasonable military assessment based upon consideration of the most dangerous course of action presented by the enemy. Prevost intended to retain Upper Canada and took steps to enhance its security, and supported Brock's actions once the shooting started.

Prevost paid particular attention to providing the forces under his command with sufficient food and supplies. Once hostilities opened, he quickly implemented a system of illicit trade with the Americans that in combination with increased imports of foodstuffs from Britain ensured he could provide for the growing requirements of land and naval forces. Prevost also saw to the lines of communication, over which men and supplies moved into Upper Canada. That province was dependent upon a 3,000 mile long logistical line from Britain. During 1812, Prevost immediately enhanced the defences of the important Montreal-Kingston corridor and in the following year, improved it further by ordering the construction of defensive fortifications and gunboats to protect the bateaux brigades. He also increased the carrying capacity of the line of communication by adding more resources to it. The scale of these efforts was considerable. In 1812, the entire line from Kingston to Montreal was defended by just over 100 troops, while 1,315 men worked 165 bateaux along this route. By 1814, the defences had grown to include 5,000 regulars, one fort and a dozen other fortified points. Several gunboat flotillas manned by seamen and militia protected 850 bateaux worked by 4,250 men. Prevost always ensured this important line was well defended and readily intervened when any provincial commander attempted to weaken it.

In the final months of peace, Prevost was forced to walk a fine line, for on the one hand, he was told that in "the event or the apparent certainty of hostilities," he was to consider himself "vested with the same General Discretion in taking measure for the defence of the North American provinces,"¹ while he also had to be cautious and avoid any act which might accelerate the American government to resort to hostilities against Britain.² Prevost's concern was that a miscalculation on his part, or a skirmish initiated by his forces or native allies might provide the American government with a reason to declare war did not come to pass and he thereafter conducted his defence with vigour.

In the early weeks of the conflict, it appeared the war might be ended by diplomatic action, knowledge of which led Prevost to exercise caution. This immediately put him at odds with Major-General Isaac Brock, his subordinate commander in Upper Canada, who had more aggressive plans that were linked to establishing a permanent native homeland in the Old Northwest, the region north of the Ohio River that the Americans planned to further populate. Their different perspectives widened as Prevost and Brock never established a solid working relationship. Since the two men never met, Brock was never fully aware of the restrictions Prevost endured, nor did he appear to understand Prevost's plan to defend Upper Canada and the conditions under which he would withdraw from the province. The misunderstanding between Prevost and Brock widened when Brock implemented his own ideas. Brock was fortunate that inept generalship and poor preparation on the part of the Americans allowed him to get away with the potentially dangerous course of action he pursued and one wonders how Brock, if he had survived, would have fared against a revived American army and expanding navy in 1813 or 1814.

Prevost's aggressive employment of sea power is an element of his strategy that has not been acknowledged. Prevost knew something about the employment of naval forces. In the West Indies he witnessed its use in amphibious operations, logistical support of land forces and the means by which coordination between land and naval forces was conducted. Prevost made only one demand for reinforcements during the war. This came at the end of 1812, when he petitioned London to replace the Provincial Marine, which was found to be inadequate against the United States Navy, with a professional naval force and he requested the aid of the Royal Navy. Prevost saw two primary roles for the navy, in supporting operational logistics and by participating in combat. The latter role included the conduct of combined operations with land forces and independent operations aimed at gaining naval supremacy on the lakes, either through direct confrontation or interdiction of the naval building programme, by raids on bases and logistical lines.

During 1812 the Provincial Marine controlled all the lakes surrounding Upper Canada. However, as the United States Navy began to assert itself on Lakes Ontario and Erie, Prevost incorporated both bodies of water into his defensive sphere, seeking to retain control of both, but realizing that with the limited resources and manpower available to him, the priority went to Lake Ontario; Prevost accepted the temporary loss of Lake Erie. The lakes that separated Upper Canada from the United States did not hold the same strategic importance. Holding both lakes would shield the province as the Americans would be unable to launch direct attacks. Lake Erie and the Detroit River lay at the southwestern end of the province and allowed access to a large group of native allies. Geographically, Lake Ontario occupied a more central position, providing access to the important terminus and naval base at Kingston, the provincial capital of York, the anchorage at Burlington Bay and the important Niagara Peninsula. From Kingston, the lake provided a link between the depots at Montreal the roads and the waterways that led to the land and naval forces at Amherstburg.

Commodore Yeo understood the strategic importance of Lake Ontario, and one would expect this similarity of ideas would have encouraged a cordial working relationship with Prevost. While Yeo subordinated his activity with the plans of the commander-in-chief during the summer of 1813, he also exhibited a growing independence that was confirmed by the Admiralty when it changed the status of his command in 1814. Prevost's growing frustration towards Yeo's failure to follow his instructions was countered by the centralization of the naval effort on Lake Ontario and a growing suspicion of Prevost's competence, which Yeo believed was confirmed by the results of the Plattsburgh Expedition. The consequence was the end of Yeo's cooperation with Prevost.

Yeo was at once Prevost's greatest asset and burden during the war. In a short period, naval forces could unhinge an American campaign completely or, by their absence or ineffectiveness, hinder British operations. What neither officer fully appreciated at the time was the lasting influence Yeo would have on Prevost's career and legacy. Yeo's immediate and forceful attempt to lay blame on Prevost for the loss of Downie's squadron proved so successful that the Admiralty agreed to charges drafted by him and set preparations in motion for a court martial. The government concurred and ordered Prevost home. Yeo, too, was recalled, for his presence was essential in prosecuting Prevost. It must be emphasized, however, that Prevost was recalled to respond to charges arising from the Plattsburgh Expedition and not for his general conduct of the defence of Canada during the war. Unfortunately the historiography does not make this

distinction clearly and concludes Plattsburgh was merely the most egregious in a series of major mistakes made by Prevost.

Yeo's decision to blame Prevost for the setback on Lake Erie was unfortunate. His reasons for keeping men and resources for Lake Ontario were sound. The loss of naval stores from the American raid on York and the expansion of Chauncey's squadron required him, like Prevost to shepherd his men and materiel carefully. That both men could not admit to the other that they shared similar fears about Lake Ontario and similar views on the utility of reinforcing Lake Erie has all the makings of a tragic comedy which made their ability to work together more difficult, especially given the challenges that would result in 1814, as the war expanded even further. To Prevost, the existing naval command arrangement undermined the unity of effort and led him to conclude that the only solution was to centralize the direction of strategy in the Canadas at the highest level, meaning under his authority. He advocated the appointment of a rear-admiral to command all naval forces on the Great Lakes. The admiral "should have superintendence over all [the commanders on each lake] and be instructed to cooperate with the commander of the forces."³ Nothing came of this suggestion.⁴

The tragedy of this outcome is that in light of the vagueness of instructions from London, neither commander could resolve the difficulties between them and work together towards a common goal. Differences in personality were compounded by limitations in the authority of the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, a cabinet official who effectively supervised the war and the Royal Navy, whose first lord also held a seat in cabinet, allowed it to develop strategy independent of the secretary of state. The relationship between Prevost and Yeo was in sharp contrast to that shared between Wellington and Vice Admiral Sir George Berkeley, commander of the Portuguese Station between 1809 and 1812. Berkeley, who is perhaps best remembered as commander of the North American station during the *Chesapeake-Leopard* crisis, directed all naval support to the Anglo-Portuguese army. His remarkable cooperation and willingness "to fully back his army colleagues"⁵ contributed to the defeat of the French in Iberia. As Berkeley's biographer has observed, "his logistical preparations for the 1812 campaign provided Wellington with the forces and supplies to realize his operational vision, resulting in the captures of Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and the victory at Salamanca."⁶ What might have transpired had conditions been the same in British North America?⁷

The loss of Lake Erie and the Detroit River severed communication with native allies and several important outposts in the northwest and Mississippi Valley, threatening British military and trade interests in the region. Prevost's decision to complete an alternate communication route from York to Lake Huron and the use of Ottawa River fur trade route to get men and supplies to the northwest guaranteed British retention of the area in 1814 and laid the foundation of British plans to regain Detroit and Lake Erie. The war ended before these efforts could be fully realized.

During the summer of 1814 Prevost received new orders from London. Having been given little operational direction over the previous two years-in September 1813 he expressed his frustration over the absence of instructions from his superiors in London: that he not "been honoured with a single instruction from His Majesty's Government upon the mode of conducting the campaign since it opened to this late period."⁸ Prevost was now told how the large detachment of troops sent to him would be employed in a secret letter dated 3 June 1814. The reinforcements would ensure, "the Canadas will not only be protected for the time against any attack which the enemy

may have the means of making,”⁹ but would allow Prevost “to commence offensive operations on the Enemy’s frontier before the close of the Campaign.”¹⁰ The wording used by Secretary of State for War and the Colonies Bathurst gave every hint that the British were going to launch large scale offensives against the United States to defeat it militarily. This was not true as the British were still thinking in more limited terms “The object of your [Prevost’s] operations will be; first, to give immediate protection [to Canada]: secondly, to obtain if possible ultimate security to His Majesty’s Possessions in America.”¹¹ Bathurst then outlined the specific tasks to achieve the two goals cited above: “The entire destruction of Sackets harbour and the Naval Establishment on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain come under the first description. The maintenance of Fort Niagara and so much of the adjacent Territory as may be deemed necessary: and the occupation of Detroit and the Michigan Country come under the second.”¹² Lastly, Prevost was to occupy an “advanced position on that part of our frontier that extends towards Lake Champlain”¹³ to eliminate bases from which the American could strike into the lower province.

Prevost was responsible only for those parts of this plan pertaining to the Canadas. The Royal Navy and Atlantic Command were assigned roles to support Prevost. Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, who had replaced Warren in April, was to tighten the blockade of the American coast, and to create a diversion “on the coasts of the United States of America in favour of the army employed in the defence of Upper and Lower Canada.”¹⁴ He received additional ships and a reinforced brigade under Major-General Robert Ross, to strike against suitable targets on the American east coast.¹⁵ In Halifax, Lieutenant-General Sir John Sherbrooke was to “occupy so much of the District of Maine, as shall ensure an uninterrupted communication between Halifax & Quebec.”¹⁶

In executing this strategy, London took on a more active role in running the American war. Sherbrooke remained nominally under Prevost and also dealt directly with Bathurst. The Admiralty was responsible for the operations off the American coast with Bathurst coordinating the whole, communicating directly with Prevost, Shebrooke, Cochrane and Ross. London was also supervising arrangements for the coming peace talks, which had been first considered in 1812 and only formally proposed to the Americans in the autumn of 1813. Arrangements for the talks, slated to begin sometime in 1814, including the instructions for the British commissioners were also controlled by London. At no time was Prevost consulted on the possible terms to be presented to the United States, despite his role in providing the force of victory, in combination with the offensives in the Chesapeake Bay and against Maine, to enhance the proposals put forward by the British commissioners to their American counterparts.

In the event, Bathurst’s orders arrived too late in the season for all of the objectives to be achieved that year. The re-establishment of a presence on Lake Erie and the retaking of Detroit and Michigan would have to wait until 1815, while American supremacy on Lake Ontario ruled out an attack on Sackets Harbor for the time being. Major-General James Kempt, who would lead the assault, insisted that a combined operation of this scale and potential duration could not be undertaken until Lake Ontario was secure. Yeo would be unable to challenge American dominance of Lake Ontario until October, which left insufficient time to conduct the attack. This left Prevost with the prospect of mounting only two of the operations he was assigned. These were the related goals of destroying the naval establishment on Lake Champlain and securing an advanced position on the frontier which extended towards Lake Champlain. Prevost selected

Plattsburgh, New York, as the ideal position that would materially improve the security of Lower Canada. This expedition would be his primary offensive effort in 1814. He would also direct his attention to American operations, which were expected to commence in the spring.¹⁷

There is no evidence that Prevost was enthusiastic about the coming offensive. Given the situation in the Niagara and the uncertain state of the naval balance on Lake Ontario, Prevost was uneasy about sending a large force into the enemy's territory. The delay in launching Yeo's new ship and in completing the flotilla at Isle aux Noix made it impossible to convey desperately needed supplies and reinforcements to Drummond's army and to support his own advance into New York State. Prevost held the view that the co-operation of the flotilla on Lake Ontario or Lake Champlain, as the case might be, was absolutely essential to the success of the defensive struggle in the Niagara or the advance on Plattsburgh. Without the aid and protection of the fleets, he wrote, "nothing could be undertaken affording a reasonable hope of substantial advantage."¹⁸ The government he sensed, would be unmoved by his objections and the postponement of all of the tasks assigned to him until the following year. These suspicions would be proven correct when following his return from Plattsburgh, Prevost would find that he was to "undertake offensive measures against the enemy," otherwise he would "very seriously disappoint the expectations of the Prince Regent and the country."¹⁹

To historians, Prevost's decision to cancel the attack on Plattsburgh and withdraw to Canada announced the failure of the principal British offensive in the northern theatre during 1814. At first glance this seems a reasonable conclusion, since none of the stated objectives had been achieved. However as Major-General George Izard's division had been drawn away from Plattsburgh and was occupied in the Niagara, the forces left behind under Major-General Alexander Macomb were incapable of launching a counter-offensive into Lower Canada. Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough had won the naval battle, but his squadron was momentarily incapable of conducting further operations, giving the British time to recover from their loss on Lake Champlain. Without any immediate threat, the frontier of Lower Canada was secure. While peace negotiations continued in Ghent, the British Left Division that now guarded that frontier served as a powerful deterrent to any offensive action. In October, Macdonough began moving his flotilla into winter quarters near the southern end of the lake to remove it from any potential threat from Lower Canada. Despite the apparent failure of the Plattsburgh Expedition, it was the Americans and not the British who felt threatened in this region.²⁰

Sir George Prevost was a capable wartime leader. Far from home, with irregular communication and responsible for the defence of a massive and complex theatre, Prevost employed a mix of regular soldiers, sailors, locally raised forces and indigenous peoples with prudence and economy that magnified the stresses within his opponent, defeating most of their plans. Prevost was never credited with any great field victory, such as Wellington at Salamanca, Vitoria or Waterloo, but he preserved the integrity of the Canadas, ensuring it was maintained militarily, allowing diplomats to confirm its continued existence. Consideration of his conduct from the strategic perspective provides another way to view the conflict that may lead to a reinterpretation of other wartime events. It is time to offer the view that Sir George Prevost may very well have been the true "saviour of all the Canadas" during the War of 1812.

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- ¹ Sir James Craig was instructed that the preservation of Quebec was his principal object as it would be impossible to defend both Canadas. See Craig to Gore, 6 December 1807, RMC, CO 42/136: 154.
- ² Draft Letter to Prevost, 15 May 1812, Royal Military College of Canada, Massey Library, Colonial Office (CO) 42/146: 171.
- ³ Ibid, 360.
- ⁴ Yeo to Prevost, 26 November 1814, Wood, William, ed. Select British Documents of the Canadian War of 1812. Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1920-1928, vol. III: 394.
- ⁵ Hall, Christopher D. Wellington's Navy: Sea Power and the Peninsular War, 1807-1814. London: Chatham Publishing, 2004, 87.
- ⁶ Brian Mark De Toy, "Sir George Cranfield Berkeley." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography On-Line. Accessed 15 February 2012 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2213?docPos=12>
- ⁷ In all fairness to Yeo, Berkeley did not have to concern himself with the construction, outfitting and manning of his squadron to the extent the commodore did. The Portuguese Station could also tap into the resources of the Royal Navy to a level that was impossible for Yeo.
- ⁸ Prevost to Bathurst, 15 September 1813, Cruikshank, E.A. Documentary History of the Campaign on the Niagara Frontier. Welland, 1896-1908, vol. VII: 130.
- ⁹ Bathurst to Prevost, 3 June 1814, The National Archives, Kew, England, CO 43/23: 153. Hereafter "TNA."
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 153.
- ¹¹ Colonel Torrens to Major-General Sir G. Murray, 14 April 1814, Wellington, Second Duke of. Supplementary Dispatches of the Duke of Wellington. London: John Murray, 1858-1872, vol. IX, 58. Bathurst to Prevost, 3 June 1814, TNA, CO 43/23: 153.
- ¹² Bathurst to Prevost, 3 June 1814, TNA, CO 43/23: 153.
- ¹³ Bathurst to Prevost, 3 June 1814, TNA, CO 43/23: 153.
- ¹⁴ Bathurst to Barnes, 20 May 1814, Michael J. Crawford, The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, vol. III (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 2002), 72.
- ¹⁵ Some historians have presented this change in strategy as the beginning of a second war of independence for the Americans. With the "failure" of this plan, it was then said that the British attempted to cover up these events by hiding the documentation. This is not true as the correspondence has been available in the National Archives in London since 1910, with copies the Library and Archives Canada and the Special Collections of the Royal Military College of Canada since 1965. The perspective of a second war of independence has recently been disputed by new American voices. For a discussion of this topic, see Hickey, Donald. Don't Give Up the Ship: Myths of the War of 1812. Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2006, 46-47.
- ¹⁶ A fourth offensive, designed to further damage American commerce in the Gulf of Mexico, was not included in this scheme and was authorised later in the year. Bathurst to Barnes, 20 May 1814, Crawford, Naval War of 1812, vol. III, 72. Bathurst to Ross, n.d. [c. May 1814], TNA, WO 6/2: 1.
- ¹⁷ Kempt to Prevost, 18 September 1814, in Brenton, E.B.. Some Account of The Public Life of Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost: Particularly of His Services in the Canadas. London: T. Egerton, 1823. Appendix XXVIII, 77. Bathurst to Prevost, 3 June 1814, TNA, CO 43/23. Prevost to Bathurst, 5 August 1814, RMC, CO 42/157: 136.
- ¹⁸ Prevost to Bathurst, 12 July 1812, RMC CO 42/157: 35.
- ¹⁹ Bathurst to Prevost, 22 August 1814, quoted in Everest, Allan. War of 1812 in the Champlain Valley. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981, 157.
- ²⁰ Macdonough to Jones, 15 October 1814, Crawford, Naval War of 1812, vol. III, 642, 643.