

The War of 1812 in Canadian History

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The War of 1812 is one of those episodes in history that make everybody happy, because everybody interprets it in his own way.

The Americans think of it as primarily a naval war in which the pride of the Mistress of the Seas was humbled by what an imprudent Englishman had called "a few fir-built frigates, manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws." Canadians think of it equally pridefully as a war of defence in which their brave fathers, side by side, turned back the massed might of the United States and saved the country from conquest. And the English are the happiest of all, because they don't even know it happened.

This evening I should like to look at that war as an episode in Canadian history and try to discover what its real significance for our country was. It's a suitable subject to discuss in this society, because so far as Canada was concerned it was largely Ontario's war. Quebec was constantly threatened but never really seriously invaded. The Maritime Provinces were protected by British sea-power, and the war gave them a not unwelcome opportunity of showing their patriotism by relieving their New England neighbours of some of their property. The seafarers of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick went out privateering, and what with that and other things the war years were prosperous ones down east; the Maritimes could probably have managed to put up with it if the war had lasted five years longer.

But here in Upper Canada the war was serious business. The province was a battlefield; large parts of it were devastated by invading armies; its people were kept in fear for three years; its capital was twice occupied by the enemy. It was inevitable that the whole incident should leave a deep impression on Ontario's history, and the nature of that impression is my subject tonight.

A few years ago, when staying at the Royal Empire Society in London, I found in its library a Canadian book I had never seen before. It was *The Report of the Loyal and Patriotic Society of Upper Canada*, printed at Montreal in 1817. It's a volume of something like 400 pages, and it tells you quite a bit about what this war was like to the people who went through it. The Loyal and Patriotic Society was formed at York late in 1812. Its first task was to provide winter clothing for the militia then defending the frontier; it went on to the job of helping the families of serving militiamen, and later it provided relief for people who had suffered by what it called the "predatory incursions of the enemy." It got a lot of help in its good work from benefactors in other colonies and, still more, in England. Indeed, in the end it had several thousand pounds left over, and this money, donated by patriotic Englishmen to help the much-tried citizens of a distant province that had paid a heavy price for its loyalty to the Crown, was used to found a Provincial Hospital at York. That was the beginning of the Toronto General Hospital.¹

Every country has its historical legends, and Canada is no exception. One of the most durable of our legends is what I may call the Militia Legend of 1812. By that I mean the idea that during that war the country was defended by "the Militia" with only a little help from regular troops. I think this idea is still pretty widespread, and I suspect you can still find it in some school textbooks; but it isn't in accordance with the facts. It's perfectly true that the militia played an essential part in the defence of Canada, but it was still a secondary part. The country was not saved in 1812 merely by youngsters fresh from the tail of the plough. It was scientifically defended by men trained for the job. The battles on the border, particularly in the early days, were essentially a contest between ill-organized numbers on the American side and professional skill on ours. You won't find this in the schoolbooks: but Upper Canada was saved in the campaign of 1812 because the province was actually better prepared for war than the United States. It was better prepared because the British taxpayer had provided in Canada the essentials for successful defence. These were a naval force on the Lakes; an efficient body of regular troops, small, it is true, but equal to the job; and trained officers who could provide skilful and energetic professional leadership.

The regulars did more than supply the leadership. They usually did the lion's share of the actual fighting. Take a look at the casualty lists for the fiercest battle of the war, Lundy's Lane. The unit that lost most men there was the 89th Foot, a British regular regiment which is now the Royal Irish Fusiliers (Princess Victoria's). It had no less than 254 casualties, including 29 killed.

¹ *Explanation of the Proceedings of the Loyal and Patriotic Society of Upper Canada* (Toronto, Stanton, Printer, 1841). C. K. Clarke, *A History of the Toronto General Hospital* (Toronto, 1913).

Upper Canada's single battalion of Incorporated Militia, a long-service unit enlisted on a basis similar to regular troops, had 142 casualties, including seven killed. But the local units of the so-called Sedentary Militia, who had about 500 men present at the battle, had only 22 casualties and had exactly one man killed.² These were the actual lads from the plough tail; and that pretty well tells the story.

Please note one thing. I am not suggesting that Canadians did not play an important part in the defence of Canada. I am merely saying that the trained soldier was the key figure in the whole affair, and that the amateur soldier was much less important than he has been made out to be. The fact is that a good many of the trained regular soldiers were Canadians. There were five regiments of "Fencibles," regulars raised in British North America. One of them was the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles, which everyone has heard of. They were not part of the Canadian Militia, but a regular unit of the British Army, raised here in Canada for the defence of Canada. And some of the individual Canadians who most distinguished themselves in this war were regular soldiers too. One of them was the famous Colonel Charles de Salaberry, the hero of Chateaugay. He was a Canadian, right enough, born at Beauport just outside Quebec City; but he was also a professional soldier, who had entered the British Army as a youngster and learned his trade in long years of hard service in the 60th Rifles.

All the same, let's give credit where it's due. And the chief credit for the saving of Canada in 1812 is due to British soldiers. No one can read the documents that tell the story of the events in Upper Canada in the summer of 1812 without realizing that this is so. It is at least possible that this province would be part of the United States today had it not been for the presence here in that year of one single battalion of British regular infantry—the 41st Foot, now The Welch Regiment—and an able and energetic British major general, Isaac Brock. Every Ontario schoolboy, I hope, still knows the name of General Brock; but how many of them have heard of the Welch Regiment?

The point I am trying to make is one that is important not merely historically but from the point of view of national defence. It is simply that a Canadian does not become a good soldier merely by putting on a uniform and simply because he is a Canadian. He has to learn the business like other people. The reputation won by our Army in the two World Wars was not won by untrained troops. By the time the Army of 1939-45 got into action it was actually better trained than any peacetime regulars have ever been.

² William Wood, ed., *Select British Documents of the Canadian War of 1812* (3 vols. in 4, Toronto, 1920-28), III, 158.

I have sometimes wondered, if these things are true, just when and how the story got going that this country was saved in 1812 by “the Militia” single-handed. I found part of the answer, at least, in that book I spoke of, the *Report of the Loyal and Patriotic Society*. For in an appendix to it there is a document headed “York, 22^d November, 1812. An Exhortation pronounced after the Sermon, or rather in continuation of it, to induce the Inhabitants to contribute to the comfort of the Militia fighting upon the Lines. . . .” The speaker’s name is not given, but he can only have been the Rector of York, the Reverend John Strachan. He said:

. . . It will be told by the future Historian, that the Province of Upper Canada, without the assistance of men or arms, except a handful of regular troops, repelled its invaders, slew or took them all prisoners, and captured from its enemies the greater part of the arms by which it was defended. . . . And never, surely, was greater activity shewn in any country, than our militia have exhibited, never greater valour, cooler resolution, and more approved conduct; they have emulated the choicest veterans, and they have twice saved the country. .

Thus Dr. Strachan in November 1812. I cannot help comparing this statement with one written by General Brock only four months before, just after the outbreak of war:

My situation is most critical, not from any thing the enemy can do, but from the disposition of the people—The population, believe me is essentially bad—A full belief possesses them all that this Province must inevitably succumb. This pre possession is fatal to every exertion—Legislators, Magistrates, Militia Officers, all, have imbibed the idea, and are so sluggish and indifferent in their respective offices that the artful and active scoundrel is allowed to parade the Country without interruption, and commit all imaginable mischief. . . .

What a change an additional regiment would make in this part of the Province!! Most of the people have lost all confidence. I however speak loud and look big —³

What a change actually did take place in four months! What happened to transform the discouraged and hopeless community of July into the bouncing, optimistic, almost self-complacent province of November? What had happened, of course, was that General Brock, defying discouragements that would have hamstrung a leaner man, had taken the offensive. He had moved west with his tiny central reserve, and with a force composed partly of regulars, partly of militia and partly of Indians, but whose most formidable component was the 41st Regiment, he

³ To Col. Baynes, Adjutant General, 29 July 1812, Public Archives of Canada, C, vol. 676, p. 239.

captured Detroit and with it an American army. This extraordinary and quite unexpected victory changed the whole aspect of affairs in Upper Canada. Brock himself wrote soon afterwards, “The militia have been inspired, by the recent success, with confidence — the disaffected are silenced.”⁴ The province's spirits were further raised by the triumph at Queenston Heights in October, even though this cost Brock’s life; and Canadians surveying the remarkable change that had taken place in their fortunes, seem to have had comparatively little trouble in convincing themselves that their militia had done it all. I suspect that if Brock had lived to hear that “Exhortation” delivered by John Strachan, it would have given him a lot of quiet amusement. He might have been even more surprised by the description of himself which I found last week in a new American history textbook: “the brilliant Canadian General Isaac Brock.”⁵

So much for that national legend. Another thing struck me still more forcibly as I read this yellow old volume published over 140 years ago. It presents a striking picture of a devastated province. Page after page of the appendices are lists of houses burned, property destroyed and people plundered, on the Niagara frontier, at Long Point, in the Talbot Settlement and elsewhere. We count up the 80 houses burned in the town of Niagara, the 14 houses burned in the village of St. Davids. (These two communities were victims of what were perhaps the most genuine “atrocities” committed by the Americans in Upper Canada. They were exceptional, for the war in general was conducted in a fairly gentlemanly way. But let’s face it: no war is very gentlemanly. Warfare is an essentially ungentlemanly activity.)

We read only too clearly, between the lines of the accounts of the Society’s gifts to the sufferers, the bitterness and anger of Upper Canadians against the invader who had brought these distresses upon them. We catch a suggestion or two of their delight in the “retributive justice” visited by General Drummond upon the equally unfortunate inhabitants of the American shore of the Niagara. We realize suddenly what a miserable experience this war was for many of the people of this province. It was a far worse experience than anything England had in the Napoleonic Wars; for England was never invaded. It was an ordeal calculated to leave an enduring mark on the minds of the generation of Upper Canadians who had lived through the struggle.

I turn again to the *Report of the Loyal and Patriotic Society of Upper Canada*, to the lists of directors who attended the Society’s meetings; and I suddenly realize that what I am reading

⁴ To his brothers. 3 September 1812, Ferdinand Brock Tupper, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, K.B.* (2nd ed., London, 1847), 284-6.

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, William Miller and Daniel Aaron, *The United States: The History of a Republic*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ., 1957), 175.

sounds like a rollcall of the Family Compact. The lists are full of the names of men who were members of the Legislative Council, or the Executive Council, or both, in the Compact's heyday. William Campbell, John Strachan, John Beverley Robinson, Peter Robinson, William Allan, Duncan Cameron, Thomas Ridout, one could go on much longer. These, and men like them, were the local leaders of Upper Canada during the war; and later they were the leaders of the Compact.

This was probably not accidental. It is quite likely that these men, who had helped to save Upper Canada, in the field and at the council table, in the greatest crisis in her history, felt themselves entitled to some gratitude and some privilege. But I think it likely that they also felt that they knew more than other people about the facts of life in North America. The people who had lived through the invasions had no inclination to take any chances on the British connection, and it is not surprising that they made the maintenance of the connection the central feature of their political creed. The prospect of any violent breach with Britain was abhorrent to them, largely I suspect because they considered it would be tantamount to annexation to the United States.

It is interesting too to note that not all the names of the directors of the Society are those of members of the Compact. We find among them also that of "Doctor Baldwin." William Warren Baldwin, we all know, was no Tory; neither was his son Robert. Both were reformers, but they were constitutional ones. The day was to come when a great Governor General was to say of Robert Baldwin, "I consider him of more importance to the [British] connexion than three regiments."⁶ Is it mere fancy to suggest that the Baldwins' moderation owed something to a provincial political atmosphere strongly influenced by the war?

One name, of course, is missing from the roll. it could not possibly have been there, for William Lyon Mackenzie came to Canada only in 1820. He was brought up in the United Kingdom in a political atmosphere very different from that in which Robert Baldwin was nurtured, and one in which of course Canadian experience had no part: the atmosphere of radical reaction against Tory repression in the days before and after Waterloo. Mackenzie being the emotional character he was, it is at least possible that if he had shared the experiences of the people who were living in Upper Canada in 1812-15, his political career might have taken a quite different turn. I am almost tempted to suggest that he might have become a pillar of the Family Compact!

⁶ Elgin to Grey, 28 January 1850. Sir. A. G. Doughty, ed., *The Elgin-Grey Papers 1846-1852* (4 vols., Ottawa, 1937), II, 584-5.

The American invasions of Canada in 1812-15 did much, I am sure, to prevent the ultimate annexation of the country to the United States. The Americans, if annexation can really be said to have been their policy, played their cards extraordinarily badly. Before 1812, Upper Canada was getting more American every year as settlers from the States poured across the border. If the United States had only held its hand and refrained from violence, it would have had an excellent chance of absorbing the country peacefully at an early date. But the unsuccessful and destructive invasions of 1812-14 reversed the whole trend. A deep prejudice against the United States was created, or perhaps it would be truer to say, was revived and intensified. All the forces in Canada making for the maintenance of the British connection were immeasurably strengthened. The events of the war years made the permanent survival of British North America much more probable.

Turning to domestic matters, I feel certain that the memory of the War of 1812 was enormously important in the political life of Upper Canada in the next generation. It loaded the dice against Upper Canadian political radicalism and in favour of conservatism. It did a very great deal to strengthen the Loyalist tradition. It provided the stuff of a nascent Canadian nationalism — and I do not doubt that the militia legend of which I spoke, however shaky its foundation in fact, itself made a very considerable contribution to national feeling.

After all, it was the sober truth that the colony had been successfully defended against heavy odds. Upper Canada had come through a fiery trial. Great deeds had been done, and good blood spilled, upon its soil; and future generations of Upper Canadians would look back to the years 1812-14 as a heroic age, whose symbol was the tall shaft they erected on the battlefield of Queenston Heights. It is experiences and memories like these that make nations.