

A Story about History: PBS Takes on the War of 1812



Professional historians are primed for revisionary narratives, for putting all the latest methodologies to work telling new stories about the forgotten events of the past. The arbitrary arrival of a bicentenary is enough to spur such scholarly reassessments, as shown by the steady flow of recent and forthcoming publications about the War of 1812, some written by contributors to this forum. PBS's absorbing new documentary about the war suggests that it's more challenging to convince a general audience of this war's importance. A general audience needs a hook. Some wars come ready built, like the Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II: these are household wars. Surely for PBS's target publics—history buffs, primary and secondary school educators, “viewers like you”—the importance of the War of 1812 is far from self-evident. How to sustain interest? Play “The Star-Spangled Banner” for two hours? Have an actress dressed as Dolley Madison run out of a burning White House with that famous portrait of George Washington?

This documentary takes a gamble by making the war primarily about mistakes and myths, and about the historical distortions nations endorse in an effort to create a usable past. It is a welcome gamble and the film succeeds admirably. A close look at *The War of 1812* suggests that it makes available for a general audience the kind of self-consciousness and international perspective that professional historians routinely claim. The documentary is an exciting affair set to an affecting musical score, told through dramatic reenactments, and filled with realistic battle scenes and lots of musket fire. But most of the film focuses on the travesties of the war, its dramatic failures, its meaningless violence, and its negative outcomes, especially for Native Americans. No nation wins this war; ideology does. The film provides detailed accounts of military campaigns and naval battles, the biographies and blunders of American and British officers, and fascinating excerpts from the journals of two ordinary soldiers, Shadrach Byfield on the British side and William Atherton on the American. The close attention to military history is a

requirement for this genre, and the experiences of Byfield and Atherton, whose stories intertwine remarkably, are riveting. But the film ultimately argues that the real story of the War of 1812 is not about war, as the narrator concludes:

In the end, what lived on was a story about history—how its glories are enshrined in the heart of a nation, how its failures are forgotten, how its inconvenient truths are twisted to suit or ignored forever.

The film's producers are banking on the public's dim knowledge of the war in order to make a point about historiography. Indeed, most viewers will bring few passionate emotions or prior judgments to the screen. This enables the *process* of history-telling to come to the foreground as a phenomenon in itself. As the narrator elsewhere puts it, the war and its legacy stage "the triumph of myth over reality."

The film and its commentators show how legends are created out of the rubbish of national ambition. One such legend, famous at the time but forgotten now, is the story of the naval commander James Lawrence of the USS *Chesapeake*, who died uttering the declaration "Don't give up the ship!" Historian Donald R. Hickey informs us, however, that soon after Lawrence's death the Americans abandoned the vessel to the British. The film also considers Canadian pioneer woman Laura Secord, who became famous for marching twenty miles through the forest to warn British troops of an American invasion. The narrator reveals that "there's been debate about the usefulness of her trek" and devotes much more time tracing Secord's post-bellum mythologization as a patriotic national icon. Meanwhile, the American victory at the Battle of New Orleans not only loses some of its punch because the film emphasizes its timing, weeks after the peace treaty was signed at Ghent in Belgium. The documentary also deflates the myth of Andrew Jackson's improvised frontier army. "It was the American artillery," we learn, "not Kentucky rifle, that did the damage." These and other examples support the acute observation of commentator Douglas DeCroix, an editor of a New York heritage magazine. After the war, DeCroix says, both the U.S. and Canada were "grasping for national heroes." In focusing on the process of storytelling that such "grasping" produces, the film offers a meditation on the meaning of history itself.



Image from *The War of 1812*, a PBS documentary.

The abstract goal of thinking about history is made wonderfully concrete by the documentary's organizing structure. The film offers four perspectives on the War of 1812: British, U.S., Canadian, and Native American. This four-pronged focus undermines a simplistic view of the war as a binary struggle between the United States and Great Britain. It also prevents the war from being co-opted into any single national story. The film traces the conflict's origins to the pressures of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, which lay behind the British impressment of American sailors, and to the multinational struggle over the Great Lakes region, in which Tecumseh's Indian Confederacy arguably held the balance of power. Furthermore, it frames the war's outcome not as a stalemate between two Anglophone empires, but rather as a disastrous turning point for Native Americans. The Treaty of Ghent, far from returning North America to a *status quo ante bellum*, established the peace entirely at the expense of Indian nations, as the British abandoned them to American expansion. This is the one true way the war "forged the destiny of a continent," as the film's promotional materials declare.

The multinational approach reflects current scholarly practice of moving away from national narratives, even as the film demonstrates, through its exposure of the myth-making process, the way such narratives are enshrined. It also reflects the film's origins as a production spearheaded by WNED-TV, the public television station shared by Buffalo and Toronto, which has a binational viewership reaching from western New York to southern Ontario. This concrete binationality has clear effects on content: viewers in the United States, for example, will be surprised to learn that for Canadians the War of 1812 remains a great national triumph because of their success in repelling multiple American invasions. Never mind that Canada wasn't independent at the time; national myths routinely indulge anachronism.

The documentary's most illustrative moment comes when Rick Hill, a Native American artist and historian, reflects on Tecumseh's legacy in the United States. One of the greatest victories the U.S. achieved during the war was the death of Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames in 1813. Hill offers the following anecdote to explain how the United States eventually adopted Tecumseh as a symbol of its own military might. This particular instance of a familiar enough phenomenon retains its power as Hill speaks to us:

America seems to love dead Indians. Not only is that an historic line, "The only good Indians are the dead ones," but in reality the killing of Tecumseh is one of a series of victories that fuel the American spirit. If you go to Annapolis, at the Naval Academy, there is a statue of Tecumseh. Apparently they paint him up every time they're going to have final exams or are heading off to war. Somehow he's this symbol, this living symbol, for the military, even though he was defeated.

Rick Hill rolls his eyes when he mentions final exams, as if the sheer banality of the academy's custom threatens to overwhelm his serious point about American nationalism. As Hill speaks, though, the documentary cuts to black-and-white film footage of the statue from what appears to be the mid-twentieth century. (In the online *War of 1812* these images begin at 1:02:20 and end at 1:02:57.) This footage shows Navy personnel marching past the statue with their suitcases and then cuts to closer views of the statue itself until its stern visage fills the entire screen. Are these Navy men going off to war, hoping for the blessing of Tecumseh? He seems rather to be damning us all from the past. According to the Naval Academy's Website, this statue originally represented Tamanend, "the great chief of the Delawares, a lover of peace and friend of William Penn," but the midshipmen eventually rechristened it Tecumseh, "a great warrior," as the Website blithely notes, "and thus heroic and appropriate." A quick Google image search turns up many pictures of the statue recently painted for various "appropriate" occasions, from football games to Halloween. This crass practice at the Naval Academy indeed demonstrates that history is alive today. Not history as a record of past events, but rather "history" as this documentary daringly defines it: the obfuscating tool of national memory.

Of course, the film proceeds under the good faith that it presents an authentic history, not just more myth-making, and that a true story about the past is in fact possible through an accurate account of events. At times the script lamentably appeals to national pride, like when it congratulates the United States for challenging "the most powerful navy in the world" (even though Britain was busy with France), or when the narrator gravely describes the surrender of Fort Detroit as "the only time in history that a white flag was raised before an American city before a foreign enemy" (a jingoistic reflection only possible in hindsight). Such moments threaten to undermine the film's central message about how "history" emerges from a fierce desire for national stories, rather than from the truth. But we can ultimately forgive these moments because this documentary is remarkably complex, self-aware, and just. And so we can also enjoy the familiar stories when they do arrive: of Francis Scott Key composing the national anthem after the Battle of Ft. McHenry, and of Dolley Madison rescuing Washington's portrait—all visually accompanied by the animation of bombs bursting in air and a determined actress preparing for her remarkable flight.

Anyone interested in the War of 1812 or early American history would enjoy *The*

War of 1812. Also, PBS and its affiliates have offered more than the documentary to help its viewers learn and tell new stories about this forgotten war. There is a great [companion Website](#), where one can stream the entire film online, read primary sources, learn about historical reenactments, download lesson plans for educational use, read short companion essays on British, American, Canadian, and Native perspectives, and peruse countless other resources about the war and bicentennial activities. There is also a charming smartphone app that links to GPS and indicates the proximity of War of 1812 historical sites, so the march through “history” can be continued, on foot.

Further Reading

The War of 1812 is a documentary film by Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, written by Ken Chowder. It’s a production of PBS, WNED-TV, Buffalo/Toronto, and Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc., in association with WETA Washington, D.C. (2011). You can watch the film and bonus features [here](#).

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