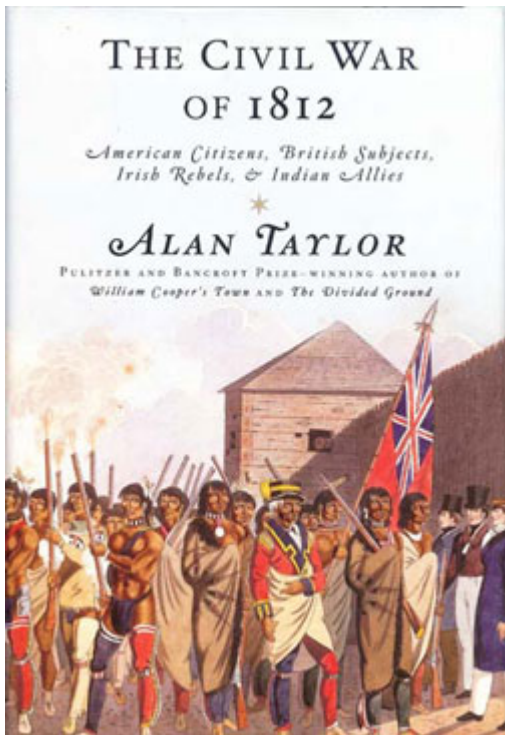


# The Not-So-Civil War

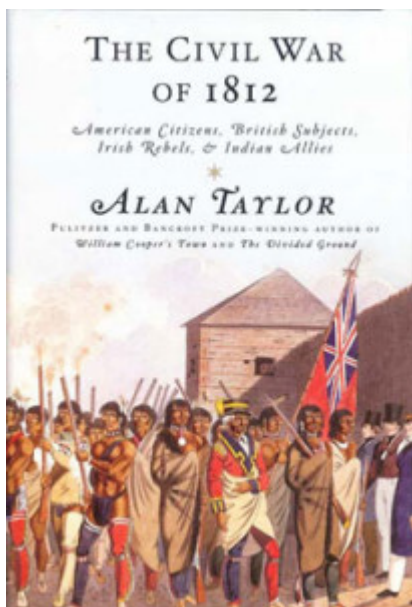


As the bicentennial of the War of 1812 approaches, the pre-eminent historian of the American-Canadian borderlands, Alan Taylor, offers this timely publication. Taylor claims that his aim is to rescue the conflict from obscurity, especially in the United States, where its history is eclipsed by the War of Independence and the Civil War. The obscurity of the earlier war years in particular is not difficult to understand when one reads Taylor's lengthy account of American military defeats on the western frontier of Upper Canada, including the famous battle of Queenston Heights, where the British General Isaac Brock lost his life. Disappointed not to be welcomed with open arms by the post-Loyalist majority who enjoyed "passive benefits" but not "assertive liberty," the U.S. invaders subsequently felt it necessary to pursue a punishing war of attrition to rescue some sense of national honor. But there was little glory in the campaigns led by inept American military officers commanding poorly trained and inadequately supplied citizen-soldiers, who suffered great hardships on the inhospitable northern frontier. On both sides of the conflict, localism and shrewd self-interest served as a more powerful force than patriotism. British sailors and soldiers deserted to the United States in droves and, on the Canadian-American borderland, Yankee smugglers drove herds of livestock and rafted produce northward to sell to the British army.

While historians have generally been quick to dismiss the War of 1812 as a war of tactical blunders that failed to change the international boundary, Taylor argues that it should be viewed as a pivotal event in Canadian as well as American history. It effectively ended the American dream that the British colonies to the north would be willing to join their federation, for Canadian

historian Sid Wise showed long ago that the war fostered a conservative pro-imperial tradition in Upper Canada. On the other hand, it contributed to American nationhood by forcing Great Britain to recognize the finality of U.S. independence. One of the leading causes for the declaration of war by the United States had been the British seizure and impressment of British-born seamen on American vessels, justified on the grounds that no one born a subject could renounce that identity and its duties. As Taylor points out, this position had effectively questioned the legitimacy of a country whose development was heavily dependent on immigration.

The second major cause of the war was the ongoing British support for the sovereignty of the First Nations on the American settlement frontier. In short, while the British denied freedom of movement for sailors and trade at sea, they relied upon the fluidity of Indians to defend Upper Canada by land. Despite the crucial role the Natives played in that defense, and despite the weak American position at the end of the war, the Treaty of Ghent sacrificed them to American expansionism. In the words of Lakota chief Little Crow: "After we have fought for you, endured many hardships, lost some of our people and awakened the vengeance of our powerful neighbours, you make peace for yourselves, leaving us to obtain such terms as we can." While the War of 1812 was a major turning point for the development of two settler nations, then, it spelled the doom of the united American Indian nation that Tecumseh had struggled for.



Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 640 pp., \$35.

The nationalist and imperialist implications of the war have already been quite thoroughly studied, but, as historian Viv Nelles observed in the forum dedicated to Taylor's book at this year's Canadian Historical Association conference, its originality lies with the fact that it both denationalizes and rebrutalizes the conflict. While previous studies have assumed either an

American or a Canadian perspective, Taylor takes an even-handed, borderlands approach. This makes good sense, given that many of the people in his study had uncertain national identities that could be altered to suit the circumstances. Taylor clearly had the slippery concept of citizenship in today's globalizing society in mind when he focused on this theme. And, in his reply to comments at the CHA session, he also noted that his graphic accounts of military discipline and the use of Natives for the purposes of state terrorism was a response to the sanitization of violence in today's America. The descriptions of suffering in *The Civil War of 1812* do eventually become numbing, but there are interesting asides. We learn, for example that British flogging of impressed American sailors was particularly resented because of its association with the treatment of slaves in the southern states, and that the American horror of bodily mutilations inflicted by Natives was exacerbated by the Christian belief that an intact and decently buried corpse had a better chance at eventual resurrection. The detailed descriptions of rather repetitive skirmishes aside, Taylor holds the reader's attention with his adept use of imagery, such as his reference to an infantry company's function as a "collective shotgun" whose coordinated discharge compensated for the erratic fire of individual muskets.

A major appeal of *The Civil War of 1812* is that it is a timely study, with chapters devoted to current hot topics such as citizenship and personal identity, colonialism, nationalism, propaganda, and state-sanctioned violence. My main quibble is that the title is somewhat misleading. Not only is the geographical focus more limited than the title suggests, with nothing on the border between Vermont and Lower Canada, for example, but the civil war thesis itself remains somewhat unconvincing. Taylor claims that this civil war had four overlapping dimensions: the battle between Loyalists and Americans for control of Upper Canada; the partisanship between American Republicans and Federalists which threatened to deteriorate into war within the United States; the conflict between Irish republicans renewing their rebellion in Canada and the British regiments that were primarily recruited in Ireland; and the divisions that developed among Native peoples who became embroiled in the war.

There are problems with each of these contentions. The Loyalists had already fought and lost a civil war during the American Revolution and, even though the majority of the settlers in Upper Canada were post-Loyalists who felt little attachment to the British empire, the fact remains that they lived in a British colony, and only a few of them fought on the side of the U.S. invaders. Is there not, then, a stronger case to be made that this war set the pattern for future American wars of "liberation" that resulted in national expansion in the southwest? As for the second point, much as the divisions between Republicans and Federalists were deepened by the war, they were ultimately resolved peacefully. Third, the Irish theme is rather peripheral largely because there were still rather few Irish in Upper Canada, and there is no evidence that those who did live there sympathized with the American invaders. Finally, Taylor shows that the Indians who joined the American side relatively late in the war did so under duress because they were aware of the long term consequences of supporting the British invaders. Despite the civil dimensions

of the war on the northwestern frontier, then, from the broader perspective the War of 1812 was essentially an international conflict. But Taylor certainly demonstrates that national identities and loyalties were still fluid at that time, and, in doing so, he has made an outstanding contribution to the relatively neglected history of the American-Canadian borderland.

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