

Are we having fun yet?: Canadians commemorate the War of 1812



The War of 1812 is to historians what the common cold is to doctors: an embarrassment. It should be pretty simple, but its causes, nature, and ending are maddeningly elusive. Thankfully, the War of 1812 shares another feature of colds: it doesn't seem to have done too much harm. So we ignore it.

Ignoring the War of 1812 is more difficult than usual in a bicentennial year, especially for Canadian historians. Although fought by both Americans and Canadians, the war is a more important historical datum for Canadians. By repelling invading Americans, the colonists and the British army demonstrated the durability of British North America in the face of a more populous United States.

The War of 1812 was also the last war fought on Canadian soil: Canadians had no Mexican War, Civil War, or Pearl Harbor. And physical proximity makes up for chronological remoteness. Nearly half of the Canadian population lives within a three-hour drive of some War of 1812 site. Little wonder, then, that so many Canadian War of 1812 books offer prefaces that recall school field trips.

The War of 1812 will also be hard to miss because of its political charge in

Canada. While the memorialization of war can cause hard feelings *between* ex-combatant nations, this one is arguably more problematic *within* the country that can more reasonably claim victory. Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a robust bicentennial celebration a part of his Conservative Party election platform, and followed through with public appropriations in the tens of millions of dollars. Canadian expenditures dwarf those on the U.S. side, where a comparatively weak economy and indifference stifled most commemoration initiatives. (Full disclosure: the present author is the recipient of a Canadian Studies grant from the Canadian government related to the war.)

The commemoration is being promoted with a view towards inculcating nationalism, like the “Own the Podium” campaign that aimed to promote Canadian athletes, especially medal contenders, in the years leading up to the Vancouver Olympics. Although stereotypes suggest that this kind of emotional patriotism would not come naturally to most Canadians, the 2010 Olympics showed it *could* be teased out.



Fig. 1. “War of 1812” (2011). For Toronto artist Barbara Klunder, the war inspired a series of images cut from paper. Papercut image courtesy of Barbara Klunder.

As the Canadian newsweekly *Maclean's* observed, the war “scratches a great many Conservative itches”: it celebrates the nation’s military heritage and its imperial connection while sidelining what federal heritage minister James Moore described as a “leftist mythology” that identifies the Canadian state with progressive social and political programs and institutions.



Fig. 2. A shako sits atop a re-enactor's car in a photograph taken in Prescott, Ontario, on May 19, 2012. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Indeed, the previous Liberal Party government would probably have spent less and downplayed the military theme. Consider that the slogan of the provincial commemorations in Liberal-run Ontario is "Pathways to Peace." Although the logic is a little odd, it does help Canadians segue quickly and efficiently from black shako hats to U.N. blue helmets, another symbol with which many Canadians like to associate themselves.

Like the Vancouver Games, the bicentennial did not get off to a smooth start. In February, at Ottawa's "Winterlude" festival, a commemorative activity involved kids donning redcoats and replica muskets. This raised hackles. Some critics objected to the fact that the event divorced guns from their bloody consequences, and claimed it was simply wrong to "glorify a war at a family-oriented event" celebrating the season. The debate even echoed in Parliament, where Senator Roméo Dallaire, formerly force commander of the U.N. mission in Rwanda, took the government to task for putting weapons, albeit mock ones, in the hands of children.

In the background—barely—was a controversy over the Conservative government's abolition of Canada's "long-gun registry," which tracked possession of all rifles and shotguns. The Harper government did not simply discontinue the registry, but mandated the destruction of all records as well. For Harper's critics, the Winterlude event amounted to promoting a pro-gun political agenda among the four-to-twelve set. For Harper's supporters, the lesson was different, if equally clear: no guns, no Canada.

A more significant federal initiative for the teaching and commemoration of the war is 1812.gc.ca, the official virtual gateway to the bicentennial. Portraits of four individuals adorn the Website portal: Sir Isaac Brock, British officer;

Tecumseh, Shawnee chief; Laura Secord, a Niagara local who became Canada's Paul Revere; and Charles-Michel de Salaberry, French Canadian battlefield hero. It's a compelling band of protagonists for a nation in which English-speakers, French-speakers, and Natives still hold sway in separate regions of the country, and between whom tension persists. The question of national integrity in Canada is a perennial one.

Indeed, Québécois literary historian Bernard Andrès recently lit into the French version of 1812.gc.ca as "an ideological campaign grafted on to a military campaign" that serves to naturalize a fictitious Canadian identity. For Andrès, "the Harper site" uses the War of 1812 to weave a politically correct, multicultural cloak that makes French Canadians just another cooperative minority. It obscures what he sees as the true nature of the relationship between the French and the English, which is rooted in Wolfe's triumph over Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham in 1759. That fateful event ushered in British domination of the French peoples of North America. Amusingly and appropriately, Andrès misspells the British general's name "Wolf." Since he critiques the Website right down to its hyphenation practices, the error seems more poetical than accidental.

Those historians inclined to view Québec as a separate nation are at pains to deal with Salaberry. They ultimately dismiss him as another aristocrat co-opted by the British, but find it best to leave the war aside entirely. *Fondements historiques du Québec*, a manual for history teachers, offers a timeline of Québec history. Somewhere between the first steamboat on the St. Lawrence in 1809, and Louis-Joseph Papineau taking the reins of the Parti canadien in 1815, the War of 1812 somehow goes missing. Well, not entirely missing—we find it on a parallel timeline on the same page, under the heading "elsewhere in the world." There, the authors describe the War of 1812 as a "war between England and the United States," and sandwich it between Venezuelan and Argentine independence. Images of the Gulf Coast or the Falklands come more readily to mind than the Montréal suburbs. Can you send a war into exile? Apparently you can.



Fig. 3. “Winter campaigning can be harsh”—photograph showing a child at a re-enactment. Photograph courtesy of Jean-Pierre Couture.

At least thus far, the mainstream of the Canadian historical profession is keeping controversy at arm’s length. Canadian historians are dutifully scheduling panels at conferences, giving lectures to local historical societies, and occasional interviews to journalists. They seem content to leave the glory, such as it is, to the re-enactors.



Fig. 4. “Papercut of Laura Secord Running Through the Forest.” Papercut image courtesy of Barbara Klunder.

Perhaps historians are simply ducking the question of, “We won, right?” That would not be impolitic, since the best answer is probably, “it depends on what you mean by ‘we.’” Reading the Canadian nation back into the War of 1812 is, after all, anachronistic. The outcome of the war left open the possibility of a future state, but that was not on people’s minds at the time. Confederation did not take place until 1867. In 1812, the people of British North America included the families of Revolutionary-era loyalists, expatriated Americans, French settlers, and Native Americans. Their actions in repelling the aggressive American republic did not imply unity; they were mostly local responses, their meaning evaporating with the threat. They had their own aims and cooperated—or not—as they saw fit.

If the war was an inchoate affair, its memory proved useful to some. In the decades that followed, immigration from the United States was cut off, and emigrants from the British Isles arrived in greater numbers. Loyalty to the Crown was increasingly touted as a prime index of civic virtue. In the eyes of later nineteenth-century Ontario elites, the war evinced that loyalty, and justified their dominance over the Canadian nation, so they celebrated it accordingly. The version being advanced today appears not dissimilar to its centennial predecessor. Canada’s professional historians have taken a long time to move past this hackneyed approach to the war, and are loath to see it return.



Fig. 5. Canadian commemorative stamps. The edge of the sheet on which they are printed has the caption, “They defended territories from American expansionism.” Courtesy of Canada Post.

Thus, Canadian scholarly discussion of the war revolves around a book written by an American. Alan Taylor’s *The Civil War of 1812* revels in the peculiarities and peccadilloes of borderlands communities—and tosses in a few Irish radicals to boot. It is a testament to the diminished estimation of the war’s significance in the eyes of the Canadian historical profession that no major Canadian historian or press has offered a new synthesis of the war for its bicentennial.

Of course, the official narrative is not completely at odds with prevailing scholarly opinion. 1812.gc.ca acknowledges that the British army, not local militia, did most of the heavy lifting. The site likewise acknowledges that,

“Without the alliance with First Nations during the war, the defence of Canada would probably not have been successful.” Of course, it is more likely that the Natives were fighting to save their own ancestral homelands, rather than a nation that would be created more than half a century later. Nevertheless, the site does clearly reflect scholars’ increasing appreciation of the significance of Native people to the fighting of the war.

While professional historians might proceed to highlight the postwar diminution of Native rights as British officials redefined aboriginal peoples as wards, rather than allies, 1812.gc.ca places the issue within a more flattering comparative frame: “Under the Crown, Canada’s society retained its linguistic and ethnic diversity, in contrast to the greater conformity demanded by the American Republic.” While this statement may resonate with American historians’ understanding of the U.S. in the age of an ascendant Andrew Jackson, it also echoes a hoary tradition of Tory condescension towards the U.S. as a slaveholding republic.

Will spending a lot of money to promote awareness of a historical event ultimately foster serious reflection and understanding? This is something that will have to be assessed over both the shorter and the longer term. Happily or not, in this particular experiment, we have a control: the United States, where near-zero investment in and preparation for the bicentennial is likely to yield minimal returns.

Leaving the interpretive field entirely to the Canadians may well affect the dynamic of the Canadian commemoration. For want of interest and money, the anticipated American counter-narrative may simply never appear. Its absence could temper the Canadian nationalist flame and leave Canadians better able to focus on debating one another about the war and its historical legacy north of the border. Still, the abdicating Americans have much to smile about: what better way to commemorate a conflict that the U.S. government entered with no funds and no plan, and that yielded only an abortive invasion? It’s true to history, and it’s cheap, too.

Further reading:

As noted above, the Canadian government’s official War of 1812 Website is 1812.gc.ca. For Bernard Andrès’ critique, see “1812-2012: Viger, Harper, et la République des Maringouins,” *Les Cahiers des dix* 65 (2011): 47-74. For a taste of the polemics surrounding the commemoration in the Anglo-Canadian press, see Jeffrey Simpson’s “Let’s Not Exalt the Folly of 1812” in *The Globe and Mail* (Oct. 7, 2011) and C.P. Champion’s response, “The War of 1812 was Canada’s War of Survival,” in the *National Post* (Oct. 11, 2011).

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