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## War Art as Cultural Signifier

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# Thomas Davies – An Eighteenth-Century War Artist in British North America: War Art as Cultural Signifier

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The topographical views of military officers were in fact simply one manifestation of the romantic inclination of English gentlemen of the later eighteenth century to delight in the splendours of natural scenery or in anything they found in their travels that was charmingly primitive, rough, quaint, or exotic – in a word, picturesque.<sup>1</sup>

In 1956 Kathleen Fenwick wrote in *Canadian Art* that the National Gallery of Canada had “acquired a group of 20 water colours of unusual historical and artistic interest”<sup>2</sup> by the military artist Thomas Davies. These works, likely finished in England, would show scenes from the Seven Years War (1756-63), which would determine the fate of this new land under British rule. In one sense these works might be viewed as the founding of the future dominion as overseas interests fought for control of sections of the North American continent. This purchase, from the Earl of Derby collection, would add a significant record of the country’s military history and identify one example of how the war artist promoted contemporary cultural ideas through the military picture.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 19.

2. “Thomas Davies – Soldier and Painter of Eighteenth-Century Canada,” *Canadian Art* 13.3 (1956), 271.

3. One of the issues that a military art scholar encounters is the dismay, or even anger, with those who would promote or discuss war art. No doubt at the centre of

Literature and art have shown us that the *romantic impulse* is a part of the character of the individual and to deny it exists is to ignore what it means to be human. It is also to misread information that the war pictures can reveal to see them as only images of warmongering. Some of the nation's best painters have become war artists and it is in their works that the most current and cherished values of contemporary society can be carried forward. It is in this vein that the military picture becomes a *signifier* of the cultural interests of the day. In an effort to balance those who would see war art as a negative exercise, I would make the claim that these pictures do as much to promote the merits of peace as they do to record the disasters of war. It is in the war art of Thomas Davies from the mid eighteenth century that the developing interest in British landscape painting is transmitted through the military picture.

### Thomas Davies and the eighteenth-century topographical picture

Thomas Davies entered the military academy at Woolwich, England in 1755 where officers were introduced to drawing and water colour painting for purposes of making topographical records of "landscape features." The biographical material on Davies does not indicate any predilection for art training, the Royal Academy would not be founded until 1768, but like so many young men of the eighteenth century, he sought to make a career as an officer in the British military. The cadet's instructor appears to have been Gamaliel Massiot, of whom

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the concern against viewing war art was the belief that it would bring forward those romantic impulses for adventure that modern war has been associated with since the English poet Rupert Brooke opined his goal in life was to have an adventure in a distant land at the outbreak of the Great War. After his tour of Belgium in 1914, Brooke wrote of the war experience: "I've never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so pervasively happy; like a stream flowing entirely to one end. I suddenly realize that the ambition of my life has been – since I was two – to go on a military exhibition against Constantinople" (*The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: with a memoir* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1936), cxxxvii-viii). The poet did get to have his adventure in Turkey, but died (from a mosquito bite) en route to the campaign in Gallipoli. As Andrew Morton has observed, Brooke's verse would later be given "a lot of stick" for its failure to comprehend the "reality of war," nevertheless it represented a typical view of the excitement of how many entered the conflict (*First World War Poems*, ed. Andrew Morton (London: Faber & Faber, [2003] 2004), xii).

little is known in terms of the master's art, but the tradition of training at Woolwich would appear to have been first-class as the next instructor of note was the celebrated water colourist Paul Sandby. Davies was trained as a Royal artilleryman, where the practice of drawing topographical views of battle terrain for application to firing guns in the field.<sup>4</sup>

Davies arrived in Halifax in 1757 and spent the next two years recording attacks against the French from the Bay of Fundy to Montreal. His account of the siege of Fort Louisbourg is more than an annotation of the French forces, but a completed water colour of a distant view of the siege of the naval attack against the fort (see Illustration 1 below). The officer-artist puts us in the British garrison; perhaps we view a self-portrait of Davies' drawing the scene from behind the fortifications, as the ships put the settlement to fire. It is here that one may make the observation that this scene is more than a military record of the attack but, indeed, we have the artist making the event into a picturesque vision of the fort under blooms of smoke. Perhaps Davies had used preliminary drawings of the enemy position to complete his finished water colour, which works either as a complete landscape scene or a record of the British victory in the war against the French. Those elements of the composition would be in the vernacular of the British painting termed the *picturesque landscape* formulated by mid-century writers like the Reverend William Gilpin.

### “Aerial Tinge”

Gilpin had studied at Oxford and pursued a career in the clergy which he combined with his interest in nature and art. In 1768 he published his seminal work *Essays on Prints* where he developed his ideas on landscape art and the picturesque. Prior to the middle of the eighteenth century, Italian and French painters had dominated the British interest in landscape art. Painters like Salvador Rosa and Claude Gellée had attained a high level of connoisseurship among the English collectors. It would be to these artists and their works that literary accounts would be referred to in guidebooks and descriptive passages

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4. J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: a history* (Toronto: U of T P, [1966] 1988), 48-49. Davies' commissioned rank was Lieutenant of Fireworks.

of landscape. Horace Walpole described a trip through the Alps as if in a picture: “Precipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, rumblings – Salvator Rosa.”<sup>5</sup> Claude became the poetic light-painter that estate planners like William Kent would model their park-like vistas upon: “At Rousham in Oxfordshire, one can still see how he coaxed the English countryside into a Claudian composition.”<sup>6</sup> One could even make the experience more picturesque by looking through a “Claude glass” whereupon the scene became *coloured* like the light in the French master’s painting. Indeed nature was imitating art and it fell to Gilpin to codify what this meant for “the unexperienced [sic] collector” of prints.<sup>7</sup>

Gilpin based his study upon his own observations by looking at prints and applying terminology that had been used for painting analysis. The key point in the study was to identify “beauty” as the foundation for both art forms to which the author used the term “picturesque” to describe this “agreeable” quality in a picture.<sup>8</sup> Further to what would be *agreeable* in a picture was its presentation so the whole would be considered before its parts, as in a grouping of figures or the unifying force that light could bring to a scene. Gilpin wrote that the artist should follow the language of Virgil, “the most picturesque of poets,” and paint the distant part of the landscape with an “aerial tinge.” Having achieved a unifying force the artist might then add another agreeable quality by having some irregularity in his picture to add visual interest. Rosa was said to have lived amongst the banditti of his paintings and thus knew firsthand the rocky crags and blasted trees of his canvases that have come down as images of romantic adventure. It was these aspects of landscape art applied to local scenery that flourished in Britain in the wake of Gilpin’s investigation into those subjects agreeable to the picture.

Artists like Paul Sandby, whom Gilpin praised for his aquatints, applied the tradition of the picturesque in landscape to British art in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the 1740s Sandby had worked as chief draughtsman mapping the Scottish Highlands and

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5. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape Into Art* (London: John Murray, [1949] 1976), 107.

6. William Vaughan, *Romantic Art* (New York and Toronto: Oxford UP, 1978), 40.

7. William Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ECCO Print Ed., British Library (London: R. Blamire, [1768] 1792), vii.

8. Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints*, xii.

followed this with drawings at Windsor that were much praised by Thomas Gainsborough for their “real views from Nature in this Country.”<sup>9</sup> Sandby, like Gainsborough, became part of the new group of artists that focused landscape painting on the English countryside that would herald a shift from the continental approach of esteemed masters. In England the narrative became less important and the artist moved to present the nuances of nature and those rural subjects that could imbue a picture with a poetic moment or the quaintness of a rustic scene. The approach of Sandby was to set the view on a low approach into the picture like one of those prospects set up in a country estate. Sandby wanted to show the English countryside as a visual feast where an irregular line of oaks would frame the middle distance before a lovely haze of a distant town or castle. Those aspects of unity and visual interest that Gilpin formulated would find a voice in this master of the water colour who would pass on this very English approach to painting nature through his works and the assignment to teach at Woolwich in 1768.

### The Picturesque in War Art

We know that Thomas Davies returned to Woolwich between his assignments in North America and likely would have met Sandby and been familiar with his work, which seems to have had some influence on the military artist.<sup>10</sup> The military pictures in the Derby collection have a consistently low viewpoint into the scene as if the artist had wished to give the viewer a front row seat onto the war. The burning of a French village on the Bay of Fundy, which Davies recorded in his watercolour from 1758, *A View of the Plundering and Burning of Grimross*, follows closely the approach for romantic or picturesque art (see Illustration 2 below). Here the viewer is set on a prospect to take in the great fire and smoke making a fine contrast to the water that ripples with reflection. The war had been made picturesque.

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9. *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, ed. John Hayes (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001), 30.

10. Sandby's engravings of British North America and six scenes of waterfalls by Davies were published in *Scenographia Americana* (London: John Bowles et al., 1768). See John E. Crowley, “The *Scenographia Americana* (1768),” *Common-Place*, www.common-place.org, vol. 6, no. 2 (Jan. 2006), 1-13. (28/05/2010).

This motif of viewer from the prospect is made clear in Davies' painting *A View of Fort La Galette... and taking a French Ship of War* (1760) on the St. Lawrence where two native figures come upon a naval encounter on the river (see Illustration 3 below). Davies had been assigned to Captain Samuel Strechey and the battle recorded the taking of "the French ship *Ouatouaise* 'by 4 Boats of 1 Gun each.'"<sup>11</sup> The pedestrians have come upon the scene from an adjoining trail and one appears to gesture with excitement of the distant ships, while the other stops to take in the display of the guns firing. Further on other figures, caught in their routine of village life, complete the audience for the picturesque display of war. The effect is one of a kind of entertainment where the locals are treated to a spectacle. Here war is an incident in nature and it is to the picturesque vision that Davies utilized his subject for the dominant idea in landscape painting of the day. The result is one of connoisseurship where the officer-artist has one eye on his military subject and another on the society back in England who have developed a taste for the finer effects of visual delight in landscape painting. To this end Davies has remained current, even in this distant land, where his pine trees along the St. Lawrence have been painted with an "aerial tinge."

Davies followed up these military pictures with ones that contained no trace of war and became pure records of the picturesque beauty of Canada. It became clear that had his life not been directed toward the military he would have pursued his love of nature and landscape painting with a career as an artist. Yet it is to our advantage that he had tours over three decades as an officer-artist to record this important early history of North America. The result of this work, beyond the military record, would be to show the linkage between war subject and British picturesque tradition, which would identify that special contribution of landscape painting to the history of art.

Inherent in the success of Davies' pictures was this presentation of cultural ideas of the day that can be identified in war artists from Benjamin West to Alex Colville. When West painted his iconic *The Death of Wolfe* (1770) he was at the same time promoting the academy approach of history painting to focus on the idea of self-sacrifice for the

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11. C. P. Stacey, "Thomas Davies – Soldier and Painter of Eighteenth-Century Canada," *Canadian Art* 13.3 (1956) 275.

benefit of the mother country. As well, when Colville painted holocaust victims (1946) he was reflecting on issues of international law and justice in the precise vision of his style of painting. In all of this the artist's mission was to record and comment on war as that mirror that reflected contemporary life about which conflict was but one aspect. The work of Thomas Davies remains an aspect of the eighteenth century that recorded British war with the French in a framework that showed the capability of nations toward cultural achievement even when preoccupied with the realities of war.



Illustration 1: Thomas Davies, *A View of the Siege of Louisbourg*, 1758 (National Gallery of Canada).





Illustration 2: Thomas Davies, *A View of the Plundering and Burning of Grimross, 1758* (National Gallery of Canada).

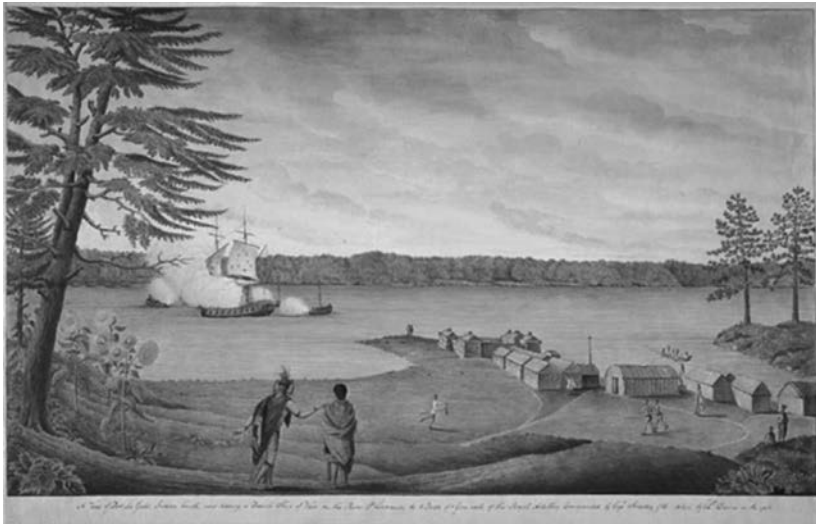


Illustration 3: Thomas Davies, *A View of Fort La Galette, Indian Castle, and Taking a French Ship of War on the River St. Lawrence, 1760* (National Gallery of Canada).