

## Introduction

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## Introduction

The bi-centennial of the War of 1812 was launched with much fanfare in Canada. Official government pronouncements were made as 2012 began, and new funding programs were unveiled. However, it seems these were hardly necessary as Canadians had already rallied to the cause with as much or more vigour than their ancestors did two centuries earlier. Commemorative lectures and dinners were scheduled across the country. New museum exhibits were opened and re-enactments on a large scale were planned for the warmer months. A spate of books on the war—some new, others re-hashing old stories—had already hit the market. Internet, television, newspaper and radio interest seemed to know no end. Even some Americans had taken notice; the year began with a two-hour PBS documentary on the war, and the State of Maryland had earmarked \$25,000,000 to promote the bi-centennial.

Is there anything new to say about the 200-year-old conflict? We've largely resolved what happened, but why things happened and what it all means are still open questions. Even the age-old issue of who won the war is still very much in debate, but perhaps without the rancour of the past.

While many are discovering the War of 1812 for the first time, it has long been a topic of interest for the Ontario Historical Society. In the 103 volumes of *Ontario History*, 73 articles and 36 book reviews (over 1,200 pages) have dealt

with the subject. Four of the ten articles in this special issue on the war have been culled from that rich backlog. Essays by Barlow Cumberland and Adam Shortt come from the journal's early years (1907 and 1911 respectively) and deal with topics not often present in more recent works. William Renwick Riddell's seminal account of the Bloody Assize of 1814 is amazing for the depth of its analysis even ninety years after it first appeared. Finally, Charles W. Humphries' 1959 account of the capture of York in 1813 is an example to all scholars of how academic history can also be exciting.

But new work is still being written on the topic of the war. Elaine Young's examination of how the centennial of the Battle of Lundy's Lane was celebrated in 1914 makes us aware that some things never change. Then, as now, the political agendas of governments took precedence over the wishes of citizens. In 1914 the requirements of a new Anglo-American rapprochement on the eve of the Great War turned what event organizers envisioned as the commemoration of a battle into a celebration of peace and, in the process, sent out conflicting messages about Canada's place in the world and its relationship with the United States.

In a similar vein, Todd Stubb's article on the raising of the HMS Nancy in the 1920s examines the conflict between the rural community of Wasaga Beach and the city of Toronto, initially backed by the provincial government, over owner-

ship of both the ship's hull and the right to interpret it. The conflict highlights how "Ontarians conceptualized their history and historical meanings of place."

Timothy S. Forest's contribution also deals with the issue of commemoration. Canadians and Americans along the Niagara River today deal with the War of 1812 in very different ways. The former remember the many battles with regional and national pride; the latter downplay or entirely ignore the conflict. This article uncovers the historical, geographic, economic and demographic explanations as to why the war has been transformed into "an epic victory for some, a defeat for others, and an embarrassment best ignored for many."

Three new articles address aspects of the war itself. It is often remarked how much of an advantage the United States had at the beginning of the war. America's population and its economic and military capacities dwarfed those of its northern foe, yet the U.S. army did not achieve its military objectives. Mark A. Olinger's article offers an explanation for this failure. Poor organization early in the war meant that most of the units of the U.S. Army "had little training and were poorly equipped, creating largely ineffective fighting forces."

The American invasion of Canada had a great impact on the life of one of

Upper Canada's most influential men, the Rev. John Strachan. While Charles Humphries account of the siege of York shows how Strachan emerged as a leading force in the colony, James Tyler Robertson's article examines Strachan's often-controversial wartime writings on the role of Native armies on the battlefield and what he perceived as an American goal to exterminate the indigenous peoples. "These writings both challenged the prevalent assumption at the time that Natives were simply pawns in the contest and posited a rarely examined explanation of why Upper Canada was vital to both Native and Imperial concerns."

Finally, Jean Morrison also examines a lesser-known cause of the invasion: namely the desire on the part of both the British and the Americans to control and expand the territorial base of the fur trade in the west. This was a goal also shared by the North West Company, which subsequently played an important military role in the war through its ships and its own Corps of Canadian Volunteers. In the process, it helped make the war truly continental in scope by spreading it as far as the Pacific coast.

On behalf of my co-editor for this special issue of *Ontario History*, Prof. Clare Dale of Carleton University, I hope these articles will both enlighten and inform.

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