

The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 6

10-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

MacDonald, Heather (2013) "Heroes and Identity: Two-Hundred Years in the Making," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol1/iss1/6>

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Heroes and Identity: Two-Hundred Years in the Making

Cover Page Footnote

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Heroes and Identity: Two-Hundred Years in the Making

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The year 2012 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the War of 1812. The Canadian Federal Government is using this anniversary to illustrate the importance of this conflict in creating modern Canada. The Federal Government through the retelling and commemorating the historical stories of Laura Secord, Tecumseh, Sir Isaac Brock, and Charles de Salaberry is endorsing the claim that “[Canadians] stood side by side and won the fight for Canada.”¹ One of the major productions highlighting the stories of these four War of 1812 ‘heroes’ was the *Canada: Forged in Fire* series, dramatizing the lives and heroic actions of Secord, Tecumseh, de Salaberry and Brock. Through these vignettes the government is emphasising the importance of these figures, justifying their role as the main figures

of the bicentennial commemorations and legitimizing the significance of the War of 1812 in establishing Canadian Identity. Even the title of the series leaves little room for ambiguity in relation to its overall message.

The Federal Government, to encourage national participation in this commemoration allocated \$28 million for War of 1812 related initiatives to be carried out until 2015.² Federal organizations, such as Canadian Heritage, Parks Canada, and the Canadian War Museum, in addition to commemorative ceremonies and re-enactments, have produced educational films, pamphlets, posters, stamps, coins, and exhibits in order to bring the War of 1812 to the doorstep of all Canadians.³ The purpose of this paper is twofold. It will, first, explore the origins of the main subsets of heroes: Women, First Nations, English, and French Canadians, and explain how these groups became the federal government's War of 1812's 'go to' heroes. This paper, secondly, will explore the problems and contradictions with the *Canada: Forged in Fire* approach to national identity and argue that the Canadian Government's War of 1812 celebration cannot unite all Canadians, which is its originally intent, because the traditional heroes and imperialist rhetoric presented in the bicentennial commemorations fails to represent the diversity of Canada's population today.⁴ This process, in the end, alienates more than it unites, and in a time when regional identity has trumped national identity a few badges and plaques cannot erase the past.

Shortly after Canada's Confederation four distinct groups of 'heroes' will emerge in the nation's War of 1812 histories and commemorations. English- and French-Canadians, First Nations, and Women each presented their own respective heroes and argued for their legitimate place within the 1812 narrative. English-Canadians

used Major General Sir Isaac Brock as the sole embodiment of loyalty and bravery, he is the archetypical Canadian soldier. Brock began his elevation to mythical status before his death at the Battle of Queenston Heights on 13 October 1812. Historian Cecilia Morgan in *Public Men and Virtuous Women* writes that Brock shortly after his death was seen by English-Canadians Loyalist, such as John Strachan, as the perfect Christian soldier and his actions saved Upper Canada from the immoral and unjust actions of the American aggressors.⁵ Despite his death within the first few minutes of the battle he became the known as the hero of Queenston Heights. Brock's actions inspired many English Canadians (non-Francophones, in particular) to claim him as their hero and thus began two hundred years of commemoration.

The historical commemoration of General Brock as a Canadian hero began in the 1820s with the construction of a commemorative column. Brock's Column, first erected in 1824 and replaced in 1856, was part of local and provincial initiatives to memorialize his sacrifice and the victory of the War of 1812.⁶ This victory helped proved Canada's loyalty to the English Crown. Brock was seen as the "brother-hero" of all Canadian soldiers in the conflict.⁷ Brock, in addition, is immortalized through local, provincial, and federal funded initiatives such as stamps, coins, building dedications, and written and film biographies. Brock became the most-known and celebrated hero of the War before the beginning of the twenty-century. His hero status helps shaped how the average Canadian understands the legacy of the War of 1812.

Many popular and academic historians with the bicentenary approaching took this opportunity to revitalize Brock's story of the 21st century. Academic histories such as Wesley Turner's *The Astonish-*

ing General directly challenge the myth of Brock's heroism and shed an alternative motive for Brock's "heroic" actions at the Heights. Turner agrees that Brock's actions were brave, and his military victories and defensive strategies helped Canada's chances for victory. Turner argues, however, that Brock was acting on bravado and a quest for fame and glory when he charged the hill, and he questions why a Major-General was killed doing a Captain's job.⁸ If he was after fame the Canadian and British elites certainly obliged.

Historian Donald Hickey takes a more international approach to understanding Brock's victory at Queenston. Hickey in his article "Heights of Victory" writes that victory was not guaranteed, and that there were many other factors, aside from Brock's bravery, that tipped the odds in Britain's favour.⁹ To Hickey the fact that many of the American troops refused to cross the border into Upper Canada, a reoccurring theme, out of fear of First Nations' troops meant a quicker victory at the Heights.¹⁰

Wesley Turner and other historians have also critiqued Brook's attitudes towards the Canadian population for which he is meant to be a symbol of. Turner argues that Brooke was not fond of the militia he was in charge of, and he questioned their loyalty and ability to fight.¹¹ Brook, as a member of the privileged elite in Upper Canada, did not understand the lives and loyalties of the mostly American (by birth) farming population that composed his militia. His distrust of allies is also seen in his feelings towards the First Nations. Cecilia Morgan writes that Brock felt his soldiers needed to be "'restrained' [to prevent] 'acts of outrage [on] women, children and unarmed men'" and where their loyalty to the British was not as much of a concern as was their loyalty to fighting in a civilized (white) way.¹² As for Brook's attitudes towards the French-Canadian's

there is not much evidence to suggest, but one can speculate that based on his upbringing, his position in Upper Canada, and the cultural prejudices of the time that he lived Brock probably would not have considered the French-Canadians to be equals.

Brock, however, with all of these faults continues to be celebrated as the ‘Saviour of Upper Canada’ and in more recent literature he has become the man who paved the way for independent Canada. In Graeme Garrard’s article “The Saviour of Canada” Brock is portrayed as the rallying force of the Upper Canadian militia, and he awards Brock so much credit for his defensive manoeuvres that he earned the title of “Saviour of Canada”.¹³ His account, nevertheless, fails to account for the American invasion of the Niagara Peninsula, the burning of the Upper Canada’s capital York (present-day Toronto,) and any of the other officers or soldiers involved in the rest of the War’s hard-fought battles.

With the federal government’s goal to include other heroes in the bicentennial commemorations there is hope insight for a rewrite of the Brock-centric view of the War of 1812. Brock is still coined as the ‘Hero of Upper Canada,’ but now first nations’ troops, Canadian militia, and British regulars are included for their role in Brock’s victories. Brock’s *Canada 1812: Forged in Fire* episode reference his quest for glory and fame as a possible reason for his charge up the Heights, or this could just be the present foundation for critical thinking about Brock’s heroism.

While Brock was said to have inspired Upper Canada’s troops, Charles-Michel de Salaberry was a Canadian troop by birth. Fighting for the British forces in Montréal, de Salaberry led his Canadian troop of Voltigeurs to victory at the Battle of Châteauguay on 26 October 1813. He became the symbol for French-Canadian heroism

and bravery during the war, but his commemorations did not begin as early as his English-Canadian counterpart. de Salaberry's recognition for his part in the victory at Châteauguay came four years after the battle's end because George Prévost, the Governor-in-chief of British North America, took the credit for the victory.¹⁴ It was instead French-Canadians who commemorated and celebrated his victories in Québec. English- and French-Canadians, like most nations and cultures after gaining their independence, were on a quest for national heroes in the decades after Confederation. De Salaberry during this time became a household name in Québec as the defender of Lower Canada, and by 1894 he had two statues to his name, both of which were funded by local initiatives.¹⁵

It is hard to understand how well received de Salaberry was in Ontario during the period leading up to the First World War, but a 1913 article from *The Canadian Magazine* sums up at least one attitude toward French-Canadian participation. The English-Canadian author writes "there is a noticeable change in 1812 in the attitude of Lower Canada to the Québec Act. By that date French-Canadians were in fact beginning to look upon [it] as their "Great Charter."¹⁶ The author speaks of French-Canadians' loyalty to England by comparing their actions with the War of Independence with their participation in the War of 1812, saying "if there was nothing in the war of Revolution to warrant the oft-repeated boast of French-Canadian loyalty to the Empire, the same is not true of the war of 1812."¹⁷ What this shows is that English-Canadians were no stranger to hearing claims of French-Canadian loyalty, and perhaps that many English-Canadians agreed that the French-Canadians did deserve credit for their participation and actions during the war.

English Canada, however, after challenging events such as the

Manitoba Schools Question (1896,) the Boer War (1899-1902,) and the Québec Conscription Crisis (1917) were less willing to commemorate Québec's past loyalty to the Empire. Québec focused instead on promoting French-Canadian heroes who were responsible for maintaining their unique culture, identity, and language. Historians such as Desmond Morton have recently begun rewriting French-Canadian's actions during the War of 1812. Morton, in a 2012 speech delivered to the Stanstead Historical Society, argued that the French Militia were a professionally trained group who had been trained by British forces during the American War as a way to protect its northern colony.. Morton, additionally, explains that the loyalty of the Seigneurial Class, the upper class land owners in Lower Canada, was an easy victory for the British Crown because of their poor treatment from France and good treatment from the British governor. Morton uses the example of Beaver Dams, where on 24 June 1813 British and Native troops defeated the American ambush just outside the Beaver Dams settlement, as an example of how past historians have downplayed the French-Canadian's role in important victories.¹⁸

The Federal Government is attempting to bridge the gap between the English and French participation by claiming that we all fought together for the united cause of Canada. It will be a challenge to reclaim de Salaberry as a defender of Canada on behalf of French Canadians who have already established him as a hero and defender of their unique culture. Even in his *Forged in Fire* episode the narrator apologizes for Prevost taking credit for de Salaberry's victory, perhaps an apology a few hundred years too late.¹⁹

English and French-Canadians, for all their differences and similarities, both would have been at a loss without their Native allies during the War. The native leader Tecumseh, in the 1812 commemo-

rations, is the First Nations hero most readily recalled. Tecumseh, originally from Ohio, was directly impacted by the American westward expansion through native lands. For this reason he allied himself and his troops with the British in the War of 1812.²⁰ Tecumseh, unlike Brock, was not commemorated during his life, but according to historian C. Morgan his legacy “captured the imagination of nineteenth-century historians of the war, although [...] their treatment bordered on the realm of the mythological.”²¹ It is this mythological depiction of Tecumseh that has weaved its way into bicentennial’s narrative. First Nations in the late nineteenth-century are as a vanishing culture. 19th century white historians and ethnographers defined natives as a people unable to govern themselves because the age of the noble savage had passed.²² They included First Nations heroes in their 1812 commemorations and stories to satisfy their curiosity.

Natives, additionally, were during the late nineteenth-century also using the themes of noble savages and loyalty to the Empire. The Iroquois tribes, ironically, used the same rhetoric that was being employed to justify their status as wards of the state to legitimize their claims to self-government. They used heroes such as Tecumseh to prove their loyalty and their ability to keep up with the progress of the nation.²³ While First Nations failed to win self-government they did succeed in securing a legitimate place for their heroes and identity in the 1812 narrative.

Tecumseh, through the efforts of First Nations and white Canadians, has become the representative of native heroism, but some historians are starting to question if he actually representational of this status. Many academic historians, such as Michelle A. Hamilton, agree that First Nations were sceptical of another alliance with the British after numerous broken promises and were unsure if the Brit-

ish could still be trusted.²⁴ For the many tribes, additionally, aligning with the British would mean fighting their native relatives and allies living in the United States, so many opted for neutrality, but with impressive victories at Detroit (1812) and Mackinac (1814) groups on-the-fence knew that the British were the lesser of two evils.²⁵ We see within these new perspectives that Native's motivations were hardly the unwavering loyalty that nineteenth-century historians described.

First Nations, currently, are battling the Federal Government for land claim rights and the right to self-government while, simultaneously, the same government is trying to incorporate them into the unified commemoration of the War of 1812. It is difficult to see how Natives can find cause to celebrate as they were the ultimate losers in this conflict, both in Canada and south of the border. While First Nations still play a large part in commemorative activities, one cannot help but think that a place within the bicentennial's narrative is not enough to unite these groups into a common Canadian identity.

Laura Ingersoll Secord, the last of our four heroes of the War of 1812, is the most famous heroine of 1812 and her rise to such a prestigious title is all-together remarkable. Laura Secord on the evening of June 22nd 1813 set out on a thirty-two kilometre journey from her home in Queenston to warn the British garrison stationed at DeCew House, Thorrold Township in the Niagara Peninsula, of a planned American invasion at Beaver Dams. Secord's actions and information is assumed, especially for the purposes of commemoration, prevented the American ambush at Beaver Dams and led to the British victory. To understanding how Laura Secord's legacy is celebrated and commemorated the usefulness of her information is, ironically, not entirely necessary for maintaining her status as a hero.

The first account of Secord's story is in 1835 letter asking

for a military pension for her husband. In the letter she details the deeds of her brave and loyal family. We see subsequent accounts in the 1840s and 50s when she is asking for a pension for herself in recognition of her bravery and loyal sacrifice at Beaver Dams. These accounts are modest affairs and are hardly the elaborate stories that they would become by the end of the nineteenth-century.²⁶

By the 1880s women of the modern and growing middle-class are finding outlets to satisfy their desire for a more liberal education and to make productive use of their newly found free time. Volunteer associations such as women's councils, temperance leagues, and historical societies become proper public spaces for these modern women. These women played an important role in these early historical associations as they were eager to prove their loyalty to the Empire by finding and shaping national heroes.²⁷ These women found the perfect Canadian heroine in Laura Secord. Secord embodied as a humble housewife of a Loyalist husband the virtues of Canadian womanhood. She became a model for these women to build a national identity around.

Publishing her story was the first step in guaranteeing that her legacy would become part of the War's narrative. Late nineteenth-century female journalists and authors produced work that, with few exceptions, fit within the scope of acceptable topics: cooking, home economics, family, and national caretaking issues such as social reform. These clubwomen and authors under the banner of uniting Canadian women and providing new immigrants with a model to replicate began forging the myth of Laura Secord.²⁸

Laura Secord became a household and schoolroom name with works such as Sarah Curzon's 1887 work *Laura Secord: the Heroine of 1812* and Emma Currie's *The Story of Laura Secord and Canadian*

Reminiscences published thirteen years later.²⁹ These society women also successfully pushed for a monument to commemorate her brave journey to be placed in her estate. The monument was opened in 1901 and by the centennial of Lundy's Lane in 1914 the Laura Secord Estate was placed into the trust of the National Parks Department.³⁰ It took roughly thirty years for a few Canadian society women, such as Curzon, to transform Laura Secord from a housewife to a national hero, but it was her role as a housewife that enabled these women to recreate her as the heroic representation of Canadian Women. Curzon and Currie's works helped Secord to secure her and their place in public society, but her story is only useful to them because she did not stray from desirable female qualities of loyalty, obedience, humility, and as a mother and devoted wife she did not challenge women's domestic role in society.³¹ Secord as an historical figure became living proof that Canadian women can persevere and overcome obstacles while still fulfilling their domestic responsibilities.

Secord's legacy and image, in the late 1960s, as mother and wife was being challenged, but the pillars of domesticity that she stood for were too deeply entrenched in Canadian heritage to be shaken. Early women historians, in other words, by highlighting and idolizing Laura Secord and her walk promoted her as an archetypal female hero, but one who does not transpose well into our contemporary society. The Federal Government and Parks Canada in order to make her story more palatable for twenty-first century Canadians have chosen to highlight Secord as a brave hero and an early feminist who pushed for recognition despite her sex instead of focusing on her "complimentary" role as wife and mother.³² Secord for Canadian women today is one of the few female heroes they have to turn to. Her story highlights a time when women were treated unequally, a

time when they were not allowed to become war heroes the same way that men were, and a time when her journey was miraculous because she was a woman. Second story is heroic, there is no question, but her legacy is steeped in centuries of sexism that make her an unlikely unifier of Canadian women.

The Federal Government for Canada's bicentennial of the War of 1812 hopes to bring together all Canadians under one flag to commemorate our first military victory as a nation. Stephen Harper in his official Prime Minister's message defines 1812 as "a war that saw Aboriginal peoples, local and volunteer militias, and English- and French-speaking regiments fight together to save Canada."³³ While this statement is true it neglects to mention any of the motives of these particular groups for participating in the conflict. It also seems like the federal government is asking these groups to forget all their current problems, some of which stemmed from the War of 1812, and celebrate a simpler time when we fought together for a common goal. The problem with this theory is that their common goal of a British Victory was for French and Native Canadians merely the lesser of two evils.³⁴ Both French and Native Canadians knew that their chances of maintaining their cultures under the British were greater than it was under the Americans.

There two problems, additionally, with proclaiming that "all Canadians" fought together. Primarily, the Canadian military did not exist in the way we understand them today. The only truly Canadian forces were Native and French Canadian, for most of the Upper Canadian's population were recent immigrants from the United States. 'Canadian' farmers, moreover, when it came to loyalty to the crown opted for neutrality for as long as they could, and many still sympathized with their relations to the south. Even General Brock com-

plained about the loyalty of these Upper Canadians, and proving that there was not unquestioning support for this conflict.³⁵ Secondly, the problem with the all-encompassing Canadian force in 1812 is that it did not include all Canadians. The population of Canada in 1812 was not as diverse or embracing of multiculturalism as contemporary Canada, and therefore it is impossible to include cultures in commemoration that were not part of Canada until more recently. The recent addition of Richard Pierpoint, a black Canadian, to the 1812 narrative speaks to the problem of having to find a representative for a given group in order to be included in the 1812 narrative.³⁶

Laura Secord is now joined by Mary Henry “A Heroine not to be Frightened” as representative for women’s involvement.³⁷ Mary Henry’s, just as Secord, bravery comes not from fighting alongside her Canadian brothers, but from not being afraid to serve coffee while the battle rages on.³⁸ We have been using the same four heroes of the War of 1812 for over a century, and while they were each useful for propagating loyalty to the Empire in the nineteenth-century it is not a simple task to make them the heroes of a Canada that is independent and modern.

This paper has explored the bicentennial commemorative activities of the four most well-known heroes of the War of 1812 to Canada: Brock, the noble and brave general; de Salaberry, the courageous French Canadian leader; Tecumseh, the noble native ally; and Secord the housewife who became a military messenger. Each of these heroes was remembered as allies to King and Country. Their legacies’ are and were each created by men and women who used their stories to further their own political agendas. Brock was used by imperialists in Upper Canada to prove their loyalty to England. de Salaberry was used first by French Canadians to prove their loyalty to

the Empire and then as a symbol for the survival of French-Canadian culture and identity. Tecumseh became the noble savage to nineteenth-century historians, but for First nations he was proof of their ability to govern themselves. Laura Secord, finally, was used by early feminists to justify their role in public society.

The political agendas of commemorators have changed over the past two hundred years, but it seems as though their stories are left unchanged and as a result these heroes are too distant to many Canadians today. The Federal Government's desire to unite all Canadians using these antiquated heroes and legacies is a demanding and almost impossible one. The War of 1812's origins, loyalties, participants, and outcomes of cannot be unified under one Canadian banner because they differ from group to group. Trying to unite all Canadians in this way undermines the diversity and individual experiences of the people who fought and served. It is time we listen to varying stories and hear differing opinions, and then have the ability to make our own conclusions of the War of 1812 and what it means for national identity.

Notes

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2. “Prime Minister’s Message,” *Official Messages*, Government of Canada (2012), www.1812.gc.ca; *Historical Overview*, *Discover and Learn*, and *Apply for Funding* sections of the website also contain information of where government resources are being spent
3. “Prime Minister’s Message,” *Official Messages*, Government of Canada (2012), www.1812.gc.ca; *Historical Overview*, *Discover and Learn*.
4. “Canada: Forged in Fire,” Series produced by Parks Canada with funding from the Government of Canada (2011)
5. Cecilia Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women: The Gendered Languages of Religion and Politics in Upper Canada, 1791-1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 32-8.
6. Information from Parks Canada, and Niagara Parks Websites Niagara Parks: <http://www.niagaraparks.com> ; Morgan, *Public Men*, 38-42.
7. For more on the “brother-hero” myth, see Timothy S. Forest, “Epic Triumph, Epic Embarrassment or Both? Commemorations of the War of 1812 Today in Niagara Region,” *Ontario History* vol. 104, No.1, 96-100.
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9. Donald R. Hickey, “Heights of Victory,” *Canada’s History*, Nov 2012, 24-25.
10. Hickey, “Heights of Victory,” 26-28.
11. Turner, *Astonishing General*, 88-91; 94-6..
12. Morgan, *Public Men*, 33.

13. Graeme Garrard, "The Saviour of Canada," *History Today*, Oct 2012 Vol. 62 No. 10, 13-17.
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21. Morgan, *Public Men*, 33.
22. Michelle A. Hamilton, *Collections and Objections: Aboriginal Material Culture in Southern Ontario* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010) 164-8; Cecilia Morgan, "History and the six Nations: The Dynamics of Commemoration, Colonial Space and Colonial Knowledge," in *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada*, James Opp and John C. Walsh Ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010) 57-64; 72-80..
23. Morgan, "The Dynamics," 60-7.

24. Calloway, *Crown*, 208-12.
25. Taylor, *Civil War*, 60-6, 104-6; Calloway, *Crown*, 207-13; 219-23.
26. Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines & History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 120-28.
27. Morgan, *Heroines*, 130-35; 143-51; Cecilia Morgan, "'Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance': the Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Canadian Loyalist History," *Journal of the Canadian Association*, Vol. 5, No.1 (1994) 195-8; 209-212; Cecilia Morgan, "History, Nation, and Empire: Gender and Southern Ontario Historical Societies, 1890-1920s," *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 82, No.3 (September 2001) 1-22.
28. Carole Gerson, *Canadian Women in Print 1750-1918* (Waterloo: Wilfred University Press: 2012) 66-70; 128-130.
29. Morgan, *Heroines*, 130-43; 171-183; see also Emma A. Currie, *The Story of Laura Secord and Canadian Reminiscences* (1900) and Sarah Anne Curzon, *Laura Secord: the Heroine of 1812* (1887)
30. Morgan, *Heroines*, 140-55, Morgan, "Slender," pp. 200-8, Morgan, "History and Empire," 14-20; Elaine Young, "The Centennial Celebration of the Battle of Lundy's Lane and One Hundred Years of Peace," *Ontario History* Vol. 104, No. 1 (Spring 2012) 7-9.
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32. See, "Laura Secord," *Canada 1812: Forged in Fire*, Parks Canada (2011); "Laura Secord," *Historical Overview*, Government of Canada, www.1812.gc.ca
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34. See, Calloway, *Crown*, 200-35.
35. Taylor, *Civil War*, 60-6, 107-10.
36. “Richard Pierpoint, A Black Veteran of the Three Wars” *Historical Overview*, Canadian Government (2011), www.1812.gc.ca.
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Ep. 2 “Charles de Salaberry”

Ep. 3 “Laura Secord”

Ep. 4 “Tecumseh”

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