Introduction

I

Americans approaching the bicentennial of the War of 1812 will find it difficult to place the conflict in a coherent narrative of their nation's past. Certainly, they are familiar with some of its more dramatic moments, including the burning of Washington, D.C., by the British in August 1814 and their subsequent repulse from Baltimore, a victory that inspired Francis Scott Key to compose the verses that were designated as the national anthem in 1931. They can also recall Andrew Jackson's defeat of the British at New Orleans in January 1815, and to a lesser extent the earlier failure of the Shawnee leader Tecumseh to unite the Indians of the Old Northwest in a confederation to halt the seemingly inexorable advance of the American frontier. Beyond that, memories begin to dim. Occasionally, naval buffs celebrate the triumphs that were to guarantee the position of the U.S. Navy in the nation's defense establishments, but thereafter oblivion descends. Only specialists in the field of ethnohistory now pay much attention to the struggle of the Creek Indians, paralleling that of Tecumseh, to preserve their territorial integrity in the Southwest and along the Gulf coast. And almost nothing is remembered of the ten attempts made by the United States between 1812 and 1814 to invade the Canadian provinces of Great Britain – nearly all of which ended as miserable and often bloody failures. Indeed, while standing in the British post of Fort George on the Niagara Peninsula in the summer of 1989, I recall hearing an American tourist protest very loudly that she had no idea that Canada had ever been attacked by the United States.

It was not always so. For Americans who came to maturity in the period between 1815 and 1860, the War of 1812 was a decisive event in their understanding of the nation's development. Americans began publishing books on the war within a year of its conclusion – the first titles appear as early as 1816 – and the use of the term *War of 1812* as a title also dates from that year. Equally common were references to "the late war with Great Britain," a description that encouraged Americans to think of it as a sequel to the earlier war with that nation, the American Revolution itself. Consequently, it became natural, if not inevitable, for them to regard the events of 1812–1815 as a "second war for independence." The war that began in 1812 was a struggle that was forced on the United States to consolidate the achievements of the Revolution against the efforts of Great Britain to nullify them after 1783, particularly by its violations of the neutrality of the republic during the era of the Napoleonic Wars. This way of thinking eventually received its fullest expression in *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812*, a massive tome that was comprehensively researched through written accounts and oral interviews and published in 1868 by the New York journalist Benson J. Lossing.[1]

Lossing began by asserting that the Revolution had failed to realize all the hopes of Americans, who in 1783 had become "free but not independent." Why they were not "independent" he explained in terms of their failure to form a strong nation and "power to be respected," particularly by the former mother country, whose ministers in the years leading to 1812 exploited American weakness as part of a larger scheme to destroy "the whole fabric of government in the United States" and return its people "to their allegiance as colonists of Great Britain." More than one thousand pages later, after relating all the campaigns of the war on land and on sea and describing the story of the peace negotiations that culminated in the Treaty of Ghent, Lossing concluded that the war had finally established "the positive and permanent independence of the United States." Great Britain had been taught the lesson that the republic would no longer "tolerate an insult or suffer its sovereignty to be questioned." The American people were at last "truly free" to start afresh "on a grand career of prosperity, with marvelous resources, developed and undeveloped – known and unknown."[2]

[1] For a brief discussion of how the war in 1812 became the War of 1812, see Donald R. Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana, IL, 2006), 363–68.
[2] Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868), 19, 1067, 1069.

Accounts of this sort were more than mere narratives. They were also an important component of an emerging sense of American identity. In that context, the events of the War of 1812 could be drawn on as a fund that furnished an endless supply of anecdotes, icons, and images for the fabrication of the exuberantly nationalistic popular culture of antebellum America. The war was celebrated not merely in books but also in stage plays and in poems, most of which are now mercifully forgotten. Who today has the stamina to struggle though Richard Emmons's four volumes – first published in 1827 and many times thereafter – of *The Fredoniad; or, Independence Preserved: An Epick Poem on the Late War of 1812*, the opening installment of which begins in hell and passes through heaven, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., before concluding at the river Raisin, south of Detroit, ten cantos later? Or to view Emmons's epic *Tecumseh; or, The Battle of the Thames, a National Drama in Five Acts*, his 1836 re-creation of how Richard M. Johnson supposedly killed the Shawnee leader, who sank to the stage declaiming, "The Red man's course is run; I die – the last of all my race"?[3]

Artists, printmakers, potters, and sculptors of the antebellum era re-created scenes from the engagements of the war and recast the images of the heroes who had fought and died in them. Here the survival rate has been somewhat better. We can still admire Rembrandt Peale's painting of a noble William Henry Harrison; or Gilbert Stuart's close-up portraits of Thomas Macdonough, Stephen Decatur, and James Lawrence; or John Vanderlyn's classic depictions of Andrew Jackson; or E. C. Watmough's stirring *Repulsion of the British at Fort Erie, 15th August 1814*; and likewise Ferdinand Pettrich's deeply moving marble, *The Dying Tecumseh*. And politicians of all stripes burnished their claims to office by linking them to their service in the war. Without the War of 1812, it is unlikely that Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison could ever have won the White House, and between 1824 and 1852 many other candidates for the offices of president and vice president similarly drew on their war records to justify their election. Rituals of this sort penetrated into every aspect of American public life. The Battle of the Thames, for example, produced not merely one president and one vice president of the United States but also, in Kentucky alone, three governors, three lieutenant governors, four U.S. senators, and a score of congressmen.

Even so, cultures and memories change over time, and the prominent role of the War of 1812 in antebellum American memory did not survive

[3] The action occurred in act 5, scene 6, of the play.

the Civil War intact. That conflict, tragic on a scale of vastness previously inconceivable to Americans, altered the very meaning of war itself in the making and remaking of the republic. The consolidation of independence became a theme of lesser importance, to be trumped by the forging of a "new birth of freedom" that preserved the Union for posterity. To be sure, some memories of 1812 lingered, and performances of Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner" ensured that the verse and its music – despite the origins of the latter in an English drinking song – would become inextricably linked with ceremonies that required the raising of the national flag. But the diminishing significance of the military events of the War of 1812, coinciding as it did with the emergence of the United States as a world and imperial power at the end of the nineteenth century, seemed to require that the war be fitted into a new narrative about the rise of a powerful nation. It was in this climate that Henry Adams, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Theodore Roosevelt produced what have long been regarded as the finest accounts of events between 1812 and 1815. Roosevelt and Mahan, publishing in 1882 and 1905, respectively, concentrated on the naval aspects of the conflict, in part because they believed its land operations had been so inept as to be unworthy of study. More important was their concern with promoting the claim that the newly independent nation should not have neglected sea power as the best means for protecting its interests. And the lesson they really wished to reinforce was that the United States could not maintain any sort of standing as a power without the support of a serious navy.[4]

Adams was less certain than Mahan and Roosevelt that the new nation should have invested very much in naval power, but he agreed that it needed a stronger state. In Adams's view the difficulties of the war should have taught Americans some hard lessons about the impracticability of their republican notions of limited government, whereas the conflict as a whole, considered as an episode in the growth of the nation, provided an exemplary demonstration of the finite capacities of statesmen to control the impersonal and material forces that governed outcomes in human affairs. Thus, in the nine volumes of his classic *History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* that appeared between 1890 and 1896, Adams depicted the War of 1812 as a conflict that had commenced without its participants having a clear understanding of why it had done so while its conduct illustrated

[4] Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York, 1882); Alfred T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (2 vols.; Boston, 1905).

both an abundance of human folly and the unintended, and often irrelevant, consequences of such folly. By imparting these perspectives with the ironical wit and polished literary style that graced his volumes, Adams created a sense of confusion and incoherence about the War of 1812 and its significance that remains with us to this day. Ever since Adams, Americans have wondered what the war had been all about and whether it had even mattered in the larger scheme of things anyway.

After World War I professional historians made a sustained effort to answer those questions by reinterpreting the war in light of the then-prevailing Progressive theories of American national development, most notably those associated with Charles A. Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner. Here the most important contributions were made in the 1920s by Louis M. Hacker and Julius W. Pratt, both of whom explained the origins and course of the war not so much in terms of the conflict with Great Britain over maritime rights as by relating it to the dynamics of interest-group conflict and regionalism within the expanding American republic. Of particular significance was the fact that the loudest advocates of war in 1812 resided along the southern and western frontiers of the nation, where settlers seemed to be less interested in maritime problems than they were in controlling restless Indian peoples and in obtaining additional expanses of fresh land, either from Great Britain in Canada or from Britain's Spanish ally in Florida. The War of 1812 thus became, in Pratt's formulation, a conflict with "two sets" of causes, only one of which involved disputes over maritime rights. The other, and possibly more significant, precipitants of conflict were the expansionist desires of Americans themselves, and Pratt's analysis of their arguments for war suggested that their most bellicose spokesmen, the so-called War Hawks of 1812, might be seen as anticipating the goals of Manifest Destiny, the popular ideology of the 1840s predicting that the boundaries of the republic would become coterminous with the geographical limits of the North American continent.[5]

This "expansionist" interpretation of the war can still be found in textbooks currently in use in the nation's high schools. It has also compounded popular confusion about the war by perpetuating an arid dispute over what should be deemed its "real" or most important causes. Were

[5] Louis M. Hacker, "Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812: A Conjecture," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10 (1923–1924): 365–95; Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (New York, 1925); and Pratt, "Western War Aims in the War of 1812," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (1925–1926): 36–50.

these causes international or domestic in origin? That debate became both interminable and insoluble. Consequently, a new generation of scholars by the 1960s, in the age of so-called consensus history associated with the early years of the Cold War, repudiated the views of Hacker and Pratt. The emphasis on interest groups and regional conflict was replaced by efforts to identify the ideals and values that united Americans in their decision to wage war in 1812. Initially, in the studies of Norman Risjord, these values were described as an outraged sense of "national honor" provoked by the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States on the high seas, but in the work of Roger Brown, concerns about "national honor" became part of a larger commitment to "republicanism" itself – both in the institution of the ruling Jeffersonian Republican Party and in the belief that republicanism as a national creed would be in jeopardy unless Americans made another effort to vindicate the independence that had supposedly been won in 1783.[6]

Arguments about the role of republicanism, both as an explanatory device for understanding the decision for war and as the essential source of an American commitment to nationhood, had a relatively short shelf life. By the 1980s, as early American historians began to explore the emergence of a capitalist economy and society in the United States, the primacy of republican ideas and values was replaced by a reassertion of the importance of the Lockean themes of individualism and liberalism that historians had long understood to be the basis of the Declaration of Independence itself. In this context the importance of liberalism as an ideology was its capacity to sanctify the self-interested aspects of personal acquisitiveness that provided the material bases for the autonomy of the individual citizen. The collective strivings of the citizenry, at the same time, laid the foundations for the expanding capitalist economy of the nineteenth century. On the face of it, those developments might not have much relevance for an understanding of the War of 1812 – least of all as a military conflict – but few societies emerge from the ordeal of war in precisely the same condition as when they had entered into it. It was, therefore, reasonable for historians of American culture to pose the question of whether the impact of the war had been sufficient to have affected the larger forces that were coming to define the collective

[6] Norman K. Risjord, "1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation's Honor," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 18 (1961): 196–210; Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1965); and Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York, 1964).

attitudes and behaviors of antebellum Americans. And as had been the case in the past, the events of the War of 1812 seemed malleable enough to furnish insights into such broader questions about American culture and society.

How could they do so? Early-nineteenth-century America consisted of communities and citizens struggling with the consequences of rapid and destabilizing economic change, including the spread of such undesirable conduct as unfettered ambition, an increase in factionalism of all sorts, and a general loss of social cohesion. To many of the Republican leaders who called for war with Great Britain, it seemed possible that the contest, by requiring a stronger sense of national unity and more selfless notions about personal identity, might provide a means for arresting these developments. But far from vanquishing the excesses of individualism and selfishness from American life, the War of 1812 – and specifically the effects of the policies required for its prosecution, including extensive military mobilization, increased governmental expenditure, the expansion of banking and credit, and the growth of domestic manufacturing – only served to reinforce them. As a result, after the war, many of the hallmarks of a "culture of capitalism" – a heightened sense of individuality, the increasing importance of the consumption of material goods, and extensive geographical and social mobility – became more firmly entrenched than ever, all at the expense of older notions of communal republican virtue. In these ways the conflict could be seen as a decisive moment in the emergence of the United States as a modern capitalist society.[7]

It was probably no coincidence that such an interpretation of the War of 1812 emerged at the same time that the modern Republican Party seemed destined to consolidate its domination of contemporary American politics. Recent American history has also been characterized by major transformations in the nation's economic and social structures, as well as in its systems of communication. These changes have been accompanied by increasingly bitter domestic conflicts over politics and culture, to such an extent that historians have sensed that there are parallels between our own sharply polarized world and that of the era of the first American party system when Federalists and Republicans could find

[7] Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790–1820* (Baltimore, 1987). A more recent statement of this view is Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 48–54.

no common ground as they quarreled over the meaning of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Considerations arising from this state of affairs clearly influenced the first major interpretation of the War of 1812 to appear after the turn of the century, *America on the Brink: How the Political Struggle over the War of 1812 Almost Destroyed the Young Republic*, published by Richard Buel Jr. in 2005. In contrast with the views that had traced the war to unifying concerns with national honor and republicanism, Buel linked it to the ideological extremism of its opponents, the Federalist Party. By 1812, that party had been reduced to little more than a narrowly based New England rump of its former self, and one that was incapable of accepting either its minority status in national politics or the Francophile tendencies of American policy as shaped by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. As a result, the Federalists compensated for their weakness by linking their concerns to those of the British in the years leading up to 1815, even going so far as to contemplate secession from the Union as a way to escape from Republican rule. Driven by fears that the Federalists might prevail, the Republicans waged war against Great Britain to vanquish the specter of a Federalist resurgence. To the extent that the war killed off the Federalist Party, it might be deemed to have been a success, but Buel judged the risks posed to the survival of the nation as too high to have justified them. The War of 1812 has thus become a tale for our times – a warning against the dangers of extremism and ideologically driven politics.

II

All such American views of the War of 1812, be they those of Lossing or Buel, are centered on the conflict as a formative element in the history of the American nation-state. It should not be forgotten, though, that the events of this war, like those of the Revolution before it, gave rise not to one new nation but to two, or rather that these wars not only created and preserved the United States but also helped consolidate a fragmented set of British North American communities that would eventually become the Dominion of Canada. For that reason alone studies of the American War of 1812 should take cognizance of many of the most important Canadian dimensions of the conflict. Nineteenth-century Canadian writers – or at least those of an Anglophile and Anglophone disposition – developed regional rather than nationalistic interpretations of the war in which they had escaped conquest by the United States. They also wrote more slowly and on a smaller scale than their American

counterparts – necessarily so, as there was no Canadian nation to celebrate before 1867, and the various provinces of the new confederation had radically different experiences and memories of the events of 1812–1815. Much of this early Canadian literature originated in Upper Canada (Ontario) for the obvious reason that it was that province that had borne the brunt of the American invasions. And the significance that Upper Canadians attached to their deliverance from a republican future was to emphasize the importance of loyalty to the British Crown as the basis for their resistance to the Americans and, subsequently, as the foundation for an emerging sense of Canadian identity and patriotism.

This putative link between loyalty and incipient nationalism had been discovered in the war itself, most notably in a sermon delivered in November 1812 by the Reverend John Strachan of York (now Toronto) in which he made the prediction that future historians of Upper Canada would tell how the militia of the province, virtually unassisted by regular troops, took up arms and vigorously repelled the American invader. After 1815 this version of events was recycled on any number of occasions that celebrated the survival of the Canadian colonies, such as the dedication of the second monument to Sir Isaac Brock on the Niagara Peninsula in 1859 and the visit of the Prince of Wales to North America in 1860. It was further embellished by accounts of the trials and tribulations of heroic Canadian women such as Laura Secord, who was cast as a kinder, gentler version of Paul Revere by virtue of the claim that in June 1813 she had walked nearly twenty miles in the hot sun from Queenston to Beaver Dams with a milk pail in hand and accompanied by a cow, to alert British forces to the movements of an advancing American army. Over time, too, this loyalty of the Upper Canadians was construed to mean the loyalty, specifically, of those British Americans who had fled the United States at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783. Loyalty thus became the exclusive property of the United Empire Loyalist Associations of Canada, and it dominated the Canadian writings on the War of 1812 that appeared between the centennial celebrations of the Loyalist exodus in 1884 and the conclusion of World War I.[8]

After 1918 the patriotic fervor (or anti-Americanism) associated with what would become known as the Ontario militia myth diminished

[8] See the discussions by Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Useable Pasts* (Toronto, 1997) and David Mills, *The Idea of Loyalty in Upper Canada, 1784–1850* (Montreal, 1998). The classic statement of the Loyalist viewpoint can be found in Egerton Ryerson, *The Loyalists of America and Their Times: From 1620 to 1816* (2 vols.; Toronto, 1880).

somewhat. The horrors of World War I reduced both enthusiasm for the British Empire and distrust of the United States, but the myth was not finally overturned until the 1950s, when the Canadian military historians George Stanley and Charles Stacey pointed out that it was simply incorrect to claim that the militia of Upper Canada had either saved or created the nation. That honor, more properly, belonged to the regular soldiers and generals of the British army, to say nothing of the contributions of the Royal Navy whose control of the seas protected the Maritime Provinces and allowed the British ministry in London to maintain a flow of supplies and men to the regions of the upper St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes that sufficed to thwart the American invasions. Stacey also reminded Canadians that there had been little that was heroic or ennobling about the war in Upper Canada. The areas that had experienced the heaviest fighting were devastated by the conflict, which left in its wake bitter memories and disputes that persisted for many years. For their loyalty to the British Crown, Upper Canadians paid a very high price.[9] All subsequent studies of the War of 1812 by Canadian military historians have more than confirmed and amplified the findings of Stanley and Stacey on these matters.

This reappraisal of the relative significance of regular and militia forces, however, hardly reduced the importance of the War of 1812 to Canadians. To this day, these "other" North Americans still regard the events of 1812–1815 as a pivotal point in their national development; to them the war ranks third in importance in their history, after confederation itself in 1867 and the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1885. But the demolition of the Ontario militia myth also liberated Canadian historians to undertake wider-ranging inquiries into both the military and the social histories of all regions in Canada during the war. Of critical importance here has been their growing awareness that Upper Canada by 1812, far from being the stronghold of a deeply rooted anti-American Loyalist sentiment, was, in fact, in the process of being transformed into a predominantly "American" province by ties of economic interdependence and a steady stream of emigrants from the United States who had come northward to take advantage of the generous terms on which the British Crown made land available to settlers. Many Americans assumed, and all British officials feared, that these so-called late Loyalists were not loyal

[9] See George F. G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers, 1604–1954: The Military History of an Unmilitary People* (Toronto, 1954), 178–79; and Charles P. Stacey, "The War of 1812 in Canadian History," *Ontario History* 50 (1958): 153–59.