

A Canadian Perspective on the War of 1812

by Victor Suthren

When the American declaration of war fell upon the disparate colonies of British North America, it produced reactions as different as the character of each colony. But the people of the Canadian colonies were united in the belief that this was an unwanted war, governed more by the distant preoccupations of London or Washington than the needs and wishes of the King's subjects in North America.

The Perspective in Lower and Upper Canada

In Lower Canada, what is now the Province of Quebec, the French-speaking majority had little love for the British colonial overlords, who had governed them since the conquest of New France, fifty years earlier. As with the American War of Independence, they viewed this new war as another fratricidal struggle between Anglo-Saxons, in which the people of Quebec had little interest. The British government, however, had guaranteed their freedom of language and religion, and it was not clear that the Americans would do the same if they were to control Canada. Picking the lesser of two evils, French Canadians served willingly in regular British regiments and militia formations, and fought well in the successful repulse of American forces.

In Upper Canada, which would later form the basis of the Province of Ontario, the British administration was far less sure the population would fight in defense of the colony. There was a hardy, well-settled core of American Loyalists who had trekked north to Canada after the Revolution. They nurtured a bitter enmity toward their former countrymen who had dispossessed them of all they had and driven them out. But they were lost in the ranks of other American settlers who had come north seeking land after the Revolution, and who now outnumbered the Loyalists. The small and overworked British administration, and its inadequate garrison of regular troops, governed an essentially American colony of uncertain loyalty.

It was this reality, as well as the weakness of the British defenses -- the militia of Kentucky alone could outmatch the total armed force available for the defense of "the Canadas"-- that led Thomas Jefferson to suggest that the conquest of Canada would be a "mere matter of marching." The American settlers in Canada wanted to protect their homes and farms, more particularly so after the first American troops incursions demonstrated that an American origin would be no protection against burning and pillaging. But these transplanted Americans would not commit to a fight unless the British administration demonstrated it would defend the Canadas. When the British did show they meant to fight, the largely American "Canadian" militia turned out in defense of their new communities against the armies of their former countrymen.

The sufferings of Canadian civilians at the hands of American troops, and the legacy of burnt and looted communities along the frontier gave the people of Upper Canada a strong sense, not so much of who they were, but certainly who they were not. And it had been American bayonets and torches that had brought that realization. Nonetheless, when the passions of the war faded, Upper Canadians soon returned to a more natural relationship with the American communities across the border, and re-knit ties of kinship, trade and friendship that the war had, in most eyes, needlessly sundered.