AN EXAMINATION OF THE COVERAGE OF THE WAR OF 1812 IN *THE MONTREAL GAZETTE*, 1812-1815

Julie Perrone is a Ph.D. candidate in Canadian History at Concordia University in Montreal, where she examines the construction of national identity and the commemoration of heroes. She is also the Assistant Director of the Association for Canadian Studies, where she oversees the production of historical materials such as educational websites, learning guides, and conferences.

Julie Perrone est candidate au doctorat en histoire canadienne à l'Université Concordia à Montréal, où elle étudie la construction de l'identité nationale et la commémoration des héros. Elle est également directrice adjointe de l'Association d'études canadiennes, où elle supervise la production de matériel historique tel que des sites Web éducatifs, des guides d'apprentissage, des projets de recherche et des congrès thématiques.

ABSTRACT

The war may be recounted today as instrumental to the definition of 'Canadianness', but perhaps another question we should be asking is how the war was perceived then and whether it did indeed prompt some reflection on the Canadian identity at that moment. This line of questioning is at the basis of this article, reporting on the results of an examination of the coverage of the war as it happened from early 1812 to about mid-1815, in the *Montreal Gazette*. Found in this fascinating historical 'play-by-play' is indeed an embryonic Canadian identity, at least as expressed by the *Gazette*'s editor at the time. This budding identity is not yet Canadian, but seems to define itself by the relationship it entertains with the mother country, Great Britain, and its southern neighbour, the United States. This paper will examine these changing relationships in the context of an emerging Canadian identity.

RÉSUMÉ

La guerre est racontée aujourd'hui comme ayant été essentielle à l'élaboration de la « canadianité », mais l'une des questions qu'il semble devoir se poser avant toute chose est de savoir comment la guerre était perçue alors et si elle a bel et bien incité une réflexion sur l'identité canadienne à ce moment. Ces interrogations sont à la base de cet article, qui rapporte les résultats d'un examen approfondi de la couverture « en direct » de la guerre en 1812, du début 1812 à la mi-1815, dans la *Gazette de Montréal.* On retrouve dans cette fascinante histoire au jour le jour de la Guerre une identité canadienne embryonnaire, du moins telle qu'elle est exprimée par l'éditeur de la *Gazette* à l'époque. Cette identité naissante n'est pas encore purement canadienne, mais semble se définir par la relation que les colonies britanniques nord-américaines entretiennent avec la mère patrie, la Grande-Bretagne, et leur voisin du sud, les États-Unis. Le présent texte examine ces relations changeantes dans le contexte d'une identité canadienne émergente.

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Canada invited considerable focus on issues of Canadian identity 200 years beyond the June 18th, 1812 declaration by American president James Madison war on Great Britain. Important efforts have been directed at promoting the 'defining' quality of the Fight for Canada, with the idea that the War of 1812 was a transformational event in the emergence of Canada and in the evolution of its national identity. The war may be recounted today as instrumental to the definition of 'Canadianness', but perhaps another question we should be asking is how the war was perceived then and whether it did indeed foster such profound reflection on Canadian identity at that time. This line of questioning is at the root of this essay. To this end, I have examined the coverage of the war as it occurred from early 1812 to about mid-1815, in the *Montreal Gazette*. What I found was a fascinating historical 'play-by-play' that revealed an embryonic Canadian identity, at least as expressed by the Gazette's editor at the time. This nascent identity while

not yet Canadian, seems to define itself by the relationship it enjoys with the mother country, Great Britain, and its southern neighbour, the United States. This paper will examine these changing relationships in the context of an emerging "Canadianness".

FROM SEEKING APPROVAL TO OPEN CRITICISM: THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BRITISH

In 1812-1815, Lower and Upper Canada were still British colonies, and its inhabitants British subjects. The *Gazette* comments related to the British, at least during the first half of the war, show a healthy relationship between colony and colonized. More specifically, there is a sense that British approval of Canadian soldiers, performance or loyalty is quite sought after.

On August 24 1812, we learn that Fort Michilimackinac was successfully captured in the name of Great Britain. Little is told about how this undeniable exploit took place, but many lines of this article are devoted to the praises bestowed upon Canadian soldiers by British Captain Charles Roberts. We learn that "Capt. R passes very high encomiums upon the gallantry and unparalleled exertions of the Canadians in accomplishing the different orders given to them…"[1] On another instance, the pride of being 'worthy' of British admiration overwhelms the narrative of General Isaac Brock's victory over the Americans. Brock had successfully defended Queenston Heights against the invader, but died in battle before he could celebrate. On October 26, 1812, the victory is celebrated for its historical significance in British history (not Canadian history, it should be mentioned): "Our fellow-subjects in the U.K. will no doubt appropriate the splendid exertions of their Canadian brethren and will freely confess that they are worthy of the King, whom they serve and of the Constitution which they enjoy".[2] It has been argued that the War of 1812 saw the formation of Canadian identity thanks to the emergence of specifically Canadian heroes such as Isaac Brock. But let it be said that, in effect, Brock died a British hero: "[The historian] will inscribe the name of BROCK on the imperishable list of British heroes and class the victory that resulted among the most brilliant events which adorn the page of British History".[3] Besides highlighting British approval of Canadian actions, the *Gazette* also acknowledges the dependency of Canada on Great Britain's power. The arrival of reinforcements from England is of course source of joy throughout the war, given its rare occurrence. But on May 11, 1813, not only are the British naval officers incensed as a "fine brigade of Seamen from England under the command of that highly distinguished and gallant officer Sir James Lucas Yeo" but their deployment is also recognized as a god send for struggling Upper Canada, "our sister province; rendered now so dependent on their gallant exertions…"[4]

While the first half of the war saw a positive image of Great Britain, reflected in the pride expressed in being worthy of serving the British king, we can observe a slight change of discourse during the second half of the war. As mentioned before, the *Gazette* was privately owned, which perhaps allowed for some criticism of the British strategy for defending the Canadas.

The critiques are quite mild compared to today's criticisms of our participation in any wars. But it can be argued that the very presence of any form of criticism in the *Gazette* at that time is indicative of a greater negative sentiment in Canadian society. Indeed, on September 7, 1813, the newspaper's editor comments that "Most dreadful complaints are made here by some people against this administration in England for their total neglect of these Provinces".[5] Reporting on what seems to be increasing public discontent over the way in which the motherland has treated its 'most valuable possession,'[6] the editor calls for calm and patience. But to reassure its readers, it is not the argument that British reinforcements will be coming soon that he uses, but the fact that the Americans are not numerous enough to defeat the troops currently stationed in the two Canadas.[7]

The central critique directed at the British is its primarily defensive strategy. Of course, this defensive stance could be explained by the small number of reinforcements sent across the Atlantic; Great Britain was dedicating most of its military resources to fighting off the French in Europe. But while Canadians had been aware of this situation, argued the *Gazette* editor, "we are nevertheless of opinion, that a much greater effort will be required by her in the recovery of what she has lost on the continent, than would have been necessary for its preservation".[8] It was thus expected of Great Britain that she deploys more force since she now had to reconquer, rather than defend, her territory. The unsuccessful defence of Upper Canada was explained by the inadequate number of soldiers she had sent, not the performance of Canadian soldiers. In recounting the loss at Lake Erie, the editor indeed states that soldiers asked to take part in a sea battle because of a lack of qualified seamen, "what could be expected from such a composition in such a crisis, where so much depended on professional knowledge?"[9] A victory in Kingston prompts the *Gazette* editor to ask that the "weak system of passive defence" be abandoned for a more aggressive policy towards the Americans,[10] while the end of the war on European soil inspires him to remind Britain that the Canadas can "never be settled by defensive operations".[11] Seeing that the defeat of Napoleon failed to resolve the conflict in the New World, he points out again a few months later that "our operations must carry with them more serious and important effects than have lately been witnessed in these Provinces,"[12] and that "we cannot

allow ourselves to anticipate, during their interruption, any other than the adoption of a system of more determined efficient and energetic measures than has distinguished the two last campaigns on the Canadian frontiers".[13]

What these few lines are meant to show is that the War of 1812 saw the realization that Canada could (and, to be fair, had to) defend itself against the Americans. The emergence of a distinct Canadian identity undoubtedly fed into the perceived lack of interest of Great Britain in defending its two North American provinces, and the very fact that the United States failed to conquer Canada was proof of the valour of Canadians in defending their country.

WE ARE NOT AMERICANS: THE DEMONIZING OF THE AMERICANS AS A BASIS FOR CANADIAN IDENTITY

The media has been known to contribute significantly in demonizing an enemy in times of war, and the *Gazette* during the War of 1812 was no exception. But while rendering a people evil and ignoble might be part of war time propaganda, the depiction of Americans during these years also served to define Canadians….as whatever their southern neighbours were not. Arguably, distinguishing ourselves from the United States has been a continuous process (and struggle) in our on-going identity making.

The Americans are most often depicted as acting dishonourably, compared to other enemies who might have defeated the British but acted gracefully throughout. For example on November 24, 1812, the news of the capture of a British stoop containing some things belonging to the late general Isaac Brock is not dwelled upon as much as the fact that these items were not returned. The *Gazette* editor indeed writes that "By a noble-minded enemy these would be restored; but such an expectation can hardly be formed in the present unfortunate instance".[14] Interestingly the ultimate return of Brock's private objects at the beginning of December 1812 warrants a mere line in the newspaper, buried in other news about the war, and no comment on what should be deemed a 'noble' gesture according to the previous critique.[15] According to the *Gazette*, Americans seemed to run afoul of every unwritten rule of honourable war conduct. In October 1813, the taking of Canadian prisoners of war prompts the editor to comment that the developing 'American character' is best reflected in their treatment of these unfortunate soldiers, a character "inconsistent with the conduct, and repugnant to the feelings of any honorable soldier, and also disgraceful to the Government…"[16] Upon returning these prisoners towards the end of the war, but having delayed such actions in order to secure the return to safety of American prisoners, the American government's request is reported as being typical of "that abominable low cunning and chicane which have invariably marked [its] conduct…"[17]

If not commenting on the disrespectful war tactics of the Americans, the *Gazette* editor also criticizes the American tendency to inflate their victories. In July 1813, the Americans were able to capture a British schooner, using a flag of truce as a ruse to approach the ship. In addition to 'tricking' their enemy, reports the editor, the Americans were also guilty of purposely overestimating the value of their capture: "The enemy rates the value of this prize at 30,000 dollars, ten times its real worth..".[18] In a similar manner, we learn a few months later that another means for Americans to improve the truth was to take civilians as war prisoners, a "mode of swelling the numbers of their prisoners which is disgraceful beyond measure…"[19]

Such a conduct during times of war was telling of the American character, according to the *Gazette* editor, and his reporting was definitely an exercise in defining the enemy, which "exhibited a want of principle",[20] but also in opposing to this the much more honourable British and Canadian characters. Reporting on an British expedition to Lake Champlain, the *Gazette* editor compares the behaviours of the two sides of the war. He states: "Here we cannot but remark the contrast that is evident between the conduct of our officers and those of our enemy… the latter invariably grasp at the smallest article with an avidity peculiarly their own, and consider war as giving sanction to the lowest and most infamous grades of private robbery…". In comparison, he continues, British officers are said to operate on fear, not of losing a battle or dying, but of "*dishonorable and disgraceful conduct*, even to an *unprincipled and dishonorable enemy*".[21]

In these inevitably short and insufficient examples, we can see that the War of 1812 made the need for a distinct Canadian identity more pressing. Defining the enemy as 'evil' and 'dishonourable' is arguably an expected element of any conflict, so we cannot be surprised to see the Americans being demonized in the *Gazette*. But something particular to our Canadian context is that we see emerging a certain anti-Americanism based on the perception that Americans are presumptuous, cunning and less honourable than us.

CONCLUSION

In examining the *Gazette* from 1812 to 1815, I haven't seen much in terms of defining the specifically Canadian character. As any emerging identity, it seems natural to begin this ongoing (and continuously challenged) process by detaching itself from the motherland and distinguishing itself from its closest neighbour. But I did find some examples of empathetic feelings between Upper and Lower Canada: "As our sister-province has thus given us an example of what courage and loyalty can effect, let us in Lower Canada when the enemy shall dare to invade our country (and which we may daily expect) follow their steps

in the paths of glory…"[22] The editor's pride in reporting the successful defence of Montreal shows a sense of a common destiny for inhabitants of the Canadas: "Armies of the enemy were advancing to invade us, [and] all classes of individuals … have flown to the standard, with the determination of supporting their national character, and defending their country from the unhallowed grasp of the enemy".[23] Hence there is indeed a growing sense of what can be construed as 'national' unity. And from our examination of the *Montreal Gazette*'s coverage of the war, this new sense of unity was formulated and elaborated in a context of American expansionism and British abandonment. And there emerged, from the story of the War of 1812, a distinct identity: not American, no longer British, just….Canadian.

NOTES

[1] The Montreal Gazette, August 24, 1812.

[2] The Montreal Gazette, October 26, 1812.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The Montreal Gazette, May 11, 1813.

[5] The Montreal Gazette, September 7, 1813.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] The Montreal Gazette, October 26, 1813.

[9] Ibid.

[10] The Montreal Gazette, December 28, 1813.

[11] The Montreal Gazette, May 31, 1814.

[12] The Montreal Gazette, October 20, 1814.

[13] The Montreal Gazette, November 3, 1814.

[14] The Montreal Gazette, November 24, 1812.

[15] The Montreal Gazette, December 8, 1812.

[16] The Montreal Gazette, October 19, 1813.

[17] The Montreal Gazette, June 28, 1814.

[18] The Montreal Gazette, July 12, 1813.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] The Montreal Gazette, August 10, 1813. [their emphasis]

[22] The Montreal Gazette, October 26, 1812.

[23] The Montreal Gazette, November 16, 1813.