# REMEMBERING THE WAR OF 1812: GENDER AND LOCAL HISTORY IN NIAGARA

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most notable effects the War of 1812 in Ontario was the perpetuation of its memory and history. In particular, Niagara-on-the-Lake teacher and historian Janet Carnochan, in both the Niagara Historical Museum and her 1914 *History of Niagara*, examined the local effects of the war, and in particular, its effect on women in the town. While Carnochan was not alone in such efforts, her work is notable in that she saw the War as both an affirmation of Upper Canadian's loyalty to Britain *and* as an event that had disastrous, often tragic, consequences for local residents.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'un des effets les plus notables de la Guerre de 1812 en Ontario a été la perpétuation de sa mémoire et de son histoire. En particulier, l'enseignante et historienne de Niagara-on-the-Lake, Janet Carnochan, à la fois au Niagara Historical Museum et dans son histoire de Niagara en 1914, a examiné les effets locaux de la guerre, et en particulier son effet sur les femmes dans la ville. Bien que Carnochan n'ait pas été la seule dans ces efforts, son travail est remarquable en ce qu'elle a vu la guerre comme étant à la fois une affirmation de loyauté du Haut-Canada pour la Grande-Bretagne mais aussi un événement qui a eu des conséquences désastreuses, souvent tragiques, pour les résidents locaux.

Perhaps one of the more significant effects of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada was its legacy to colonial culture and the role it played in Ontario residents' conceptions of themselves over the course of the nineteenth century. For much of the nineteenth century, in the Niagara region the War's public memory focused on the achievements of men and the military. As well as tourists' visits to the area's battlefields, tributes to Major-General Isaac Brock were composed both during the War and afterwards: in poetry recited at school examinations, at services at the twice-built Queenston monument and other events that commemorated the battle of Queenston Heights.[1]

In the late Victorian period, though, public commemorations of the War began to encompass its effects on women. Memorializing women's wartime contributions and suffering involved a number of individuals and groups: British-born journalist, playwright and suffrage advocate Sarah Curzon; St Catharines suffragist and historian Emma Currie; Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon; and organizations such as the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto and the St. Catharines Women's Literary Society.[2] However, the work of Niagara-area teacher and historian Janet Carnochan was particularly memorable: her collecting

and writing of local history suggested the various ways in which the War affected the domestic realm and, especially, women's lives.

Born in 1839 in Stamford, Carnochan was the second daughter of James Carnochan, a cabinetmaker and carpenter, and Mary Milroy, Scottish immigrants who had arrived in Stamford from Ayrshire around 1830. In 1841 the family moved to Niagara-on-the-Lake; with her four siblings, Carnochan spent her childhood and adolescence in the village. In 1857 Carnochan became a teacher, first in her home town and then in Brantford, Kingston, and Peterborough. She returned home in 1872, teaching in the town's schools until her retirement in December 1900.

Carnochan's 'informal' educational work as a local and regional historian, historical preservationist, and museum director has left its mark on the historical record. She began making forays into historical writing in the 1890s with her histories of Niagara's Anglican and Presbyterian churches. In 1895 Carnochan became the president of the newly revived Niagara Historical Society (NHS), in which she was a leading figure until 1925, serving as president, corresponding secretary, and editor of its reports and publications. She became curator of the society's collections in 1901, spearheaded the NHS drive for the 1907 construction of Memorial Hall, the first building erected as a museum in Ontario, and in 1914 Carnochan published *History of Niagara*. Not content with directing the museum and writing her histories, Carnochan also worked to preserve historical landmarks in Niagara, such as Butler's Burying Ground, Forts George and Mississauga, and the military reserve, or Commons.

Like her contemporaries who were involved in the province's historical societies, Carnochan supported both Canadian nationalism and the British empire. Yet while Carnochan shared their belief in history's power to inform the present with political, social, and-above all-moral examples, she differed from her fellow-historians in a variety of ways. For one, unlike those whose enthusiasm for the imperial tie was part of a conservative political outlook, Carnochan's was a liberal imperialism: support for Britain meant support for a history of abolitionism, religious toleration, and reform movements. As well, while Curzon and Currie openly championed woman's suffrage, their writing of white women into history an overtly political act, Carnochan was far more circumspect about the need for enfranchisement, although she also believed that women's experiences must be included in historical narratives.[3]

Carnochan and her colleagues in Niagara had been collecting a range of objects throughout the 1890s that included portraits of early settlers, United Empire Loyalists, military heroes, or those who 'either as men or women in any way helped to make our town and country'. At its opening, the museum housed a plethora of such items. However, if there was one event which can be said to have stood out in the Museum's collection, it was the War of 1812, represented by military flags, relics of General Brock (including his never-worn hat, which is still displayed in the museum's permanent exhibit), sashes, powder horns, spurs, coats, jackets, tunics, uniform buttons, weaponry, and commissions of Niagara residents, as well as engravings and sketches of individuals, events, and places associated with the War. These artefacts spoke of men's historical actions and agency, as it was men who took the commissions, wore the uniforms, fired the guns, and received the commendations. To be sure, the exhibit cases could not tell their viewers who made items such as clothing, sashes, and flags: some of these might have been the result of women's work. Furthermore, Carnochan and her colleagues were committed to collecting items associated with Niagara's most famous heroine of the War, Laura Secord. Dispersed throughout the exhibits were multiple reminders of Secord, ones that encompassed engravings, sketches, and letters to spoons, a sugar bowl cover, and a large hamper.

As the reports and transactions of other historical societies held at Memorial Hall demonstrated, Carnochan was well aware of being part of a movement that spread far beyond southern Ontario. Yet she also was motivated by concerns shaped by both national and local contexts. For all of her support for Britain and Canada's tie to empire, Carnochan thought of her work as an important corrective to the notion that Canada lacked a history. Moreover, Carnochan was driven to show that the depredations of the War had not depleted the area of its historical artefacts.

Object teaching through the museum's display cases, while important to Carnochan (and to many of her contemporaries), was far from being the only way to illustrate, embrace, and elucidate; discussions of objects, documents, and memories could be woven together in a written narrative. If not quite the culmination of Carnochan's historical work, since she continued to be active for twelve years after its publication, her *History of Niagara* certainly marked a very high point in her career (and to date it still is the most comprehensive and best-known history of the town). Organized both chronologically and thematically, the book's forty-four chapters begins with a general overview of the peninsula and a discussion of its Neutral, Mississauga, and Seneca inhabitants. It then plunges the reader into highly detailed discussions of the multiple facets of the town's history. No quiet backwater, it had been-and continued to be-a pleasant, yet lively centre that attracted various kinds of celebrities and well-known figures, both from Canada and abroad, a roll-call that included writers, explorers, political figures, reform activists, and royalty. 'Almost every important event in the history of Ontario at least is brought up by the name of a visitor at Niagara,' Carnochan proudly affirmed.

Yet the *History*'s tone was not quite as triumphalist or confident as this quote might suggest. Not only had Niagara experienced serious economic blows in mid-century, it suffered an even more painful fate in 1813, when American troops first occupied and then set alight much of the town. Although Carnochan showed little interest in the minutiae of battles, she devoted Chapter Eight to the 'American Occupation May-December 1813,' first describing the battle at Crook's Farm won by the invading army, one that left a log house on the Crook property 'swimming with blood'. Those left were mostly women and children, 'as the men were nearly all away, either as prisoners or fighting in the defence of their country'. This was 'the most difficult period to give' in the town's past, since the only available sources were 'a few items gathered from conversations with descendants of those then living in the town, and a very few letters and documents'. These surviving documents and 'conversations' (we might call them recounted oral histories), depicted the capture and burning of the town as a brutal assault on the domestic realm. During the May bombardment 'people retreated to their cellars, some hung blankets over their windows, some took refuge after the burning in caves dug in the side of a hill'. As the town burned in December, Mrs. William Dickson was carried from her sickbed to watch the destruction of her home, with its 'fine library valued at £600' and Mrs. McKee's small daughter experienced frostbite (her mother had placed her on a tea-tray to try to save her from standing in the snow while their home burnt). An even worse fate awaited Mrs. Campbell, an officer's widow, and her three young children; they were not allowed to save warm clothing, saw their few valuables confiscated, and were 'exposed to the elements for three days'. Having carried her infant four miles to have it baptized, Mrs. Campbell then 'had to dig its grave and cover its remains'.

When the British returned to surround the town, the American occupation turned into a siege. 'Numerous engagements took place, one in Ball's field, the ladies looking on from the windows' and one such 'engagement' saw Mrs. Lawe entering the 'field of battle' to remove her thirteen-year-old son who had volunteered for the fight. And it was not just the townsfolk who suffered. Heavy spring rains, summer heat waves, and cold fall downpours left the American troops miserable and suffering from serious illnesses: typhoid, dysentery, and diarrhea. Furthermore, while American troops inflicted the worst damage, nearby farmers saw their crops and livestock depleted by hungry British troops. Even after the Americans had withdrawn the town was still threatened, which led to the destruction of chimneys, walls, and orchards so that an invading force would be deprived of cover.

Yet women are decidedly much more than victims. Even during the terrible events of 1813, they are canny and seize opportunities that come their way. When in 1813 Mrs. Cassady found her house occupied by American soldiers, who moved in and found her freshly baked bread on the table, she was able to strike a deal with them that allowed her to return home, bake bread for them from flour they supplied, and keep any additional loaves for herself. 'This she did all summer,' Carnochan noted approvingly, 'a proof, no doubt, that Mrs. Cassady made good bread'. Sometimes they are heroines: Laura Secord, for example.

Burning homes and turning women, children, and babies into the snow was bad enough; however, the consequence of the war went beyond the events of 1813. The burning of the town in many ways haunts *History of Niagara*: it is something that Carnochan returns to repeatedly. For one, the loss of the town's records resulted in a discontinuity in its history, one that Carnochan calls to her reader's attention in a number of places, a rupture and resulting scarcity of historical sources in what is elsewhere a narrative of plenitude. St. Andrew's church, for example, lost its records of 1812 to 1816, as the building was destroyed by the troops (as Carnochan's own church this was probably a loss she felt keenly). It was difficult, she told her readers, to write a history of Niagara's early schools, since their records also were burned in 1813; instead, she relied on a pastiche of newspapers, letters, account books, materials from the national archives, and 'tales of the oldest inhabitants'. However, despite the success of her reconstruction, Carnochan refused to let the loss be forgotten. On the next page she turned to the wartime closing of the schools, the town's endangerment and its occupation, and the scenario of 1814: 'pupils scattered in all directions, and a heap of ruins representing the homes from which had gone forth the children the schools referred to, the records lost'. The town's built history also, of course, suffered losses. In the book's discussion of early buildings and early merchants, Carnochan pointed to the 1813 burning as the reason for the absence of late eighteenth-century architecture from much of the street scape.

Carnochan's work did not go unacknowledged during her lifetime. She became a public figure in the years leading up to World War One: her name appears in the National Council of Women of Canada's 1900 *Women of Canada*, compiled for the Paris International Exhibition, and she was interviewed in newspapers and periodicals such as the *Canadian Magazine, Toronto Daily News, Toronto Star Weekly*, and *Toronto Sunday World*. In 1914 a Toronto-based teachers' chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire was named after her. In 1921 the NHS unveiled an oil portrait of Carnochan which, along with a sonnet and letters from across Canada and the United States, was presented to her in a public ceremony.

When Carnochan died in 1926 she was memorialized in both the Niagara-area and Toronto press as a Canadian 'historical figure,' a 'rare patriot,' 'Niagara's foremost woman' and its 'first citizen'. After her death Carnochan became a subject of commemoration herself in the Niagara area. The town's high school founded a scholarship in her name, local newspapers periodically ran tributes to her, the Niagara-on-the-Lake library named its local history room after her, books were written that celebrated her life and work, a local nursery bred a rose in her memory, and June 4 has been designated Janet Carnochan day in Niagara-on-the-Lake (an event which includes free admission to the museum).[4]

As I have argued elsewhere, late Victorian and Edwardian commemorations of the War of 1812 helped create narratives of national and imperial service that were pressed into service themselves as a crucial element of English-Canadian nationalism.[5] Equally importantly, though, in the work of Janet Carnochan, perpetuating the War's memory and history helped ensure that its local and gendered meanings and effects were not forgotten in the midst of more celebratory commemorations. Burning homes, dead children, and the rupture in a community's history were as much a part of the War's legacy as the perpetuation of the imperial tie and the creation of English-Canadian identity.

## NOTES

[1] Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario 1790-1914* University of Toronto Press, 1995: 51-52; George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, esp. Chs. 7-9.

[2] Beverly Boutilier, 'Women's Rights and Duties: Sarah Anne Curzon and the Politics of Canadian History,' in Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* University of British Columbia Press, 1997: 25-50; Cecilia Morgan, 'History, Nation, Empire: Gender and the Work of Southern Ontario Historical Societies, 1890-1920s,' *Canadian Historical Review* 82(3) (September 2001): 491-528.

[3] Cecilia Morgan, 'Janet Carnochan,' *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XV* University of Toronto Press, 2005.

[4] For a longer discussion of Carnochan's work, see Cecilia Morgan, 'Books and Mortar: Janet Carnochan's Historical Town,' in Morgan, *Creating Colonial Pasts: History, Memory, and Commemoration in Southern Ontario, 1860-1980*. Forthcoming, University of Toronto Press.

[5] Morgan, 'History, Nation, Empire'.