CREATING A HEROINE FOR ENGLISH CANADA:

The Commemoration of Laura Secord

ABSTRACT

Morgan addresses some of the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in the study of such heroines, as Laura Secord, about whom historical records yield very little information. The author suggests that to point to the absences that surround certain heroines' presence in history is certainly a starting point to filling in these historical blanks. Reconstituting the lives of heroines outside of the framework of the "nation," towards the realm of the personal, perhaps even of the domestic, may also result in creating a more complete picture of Secord's life.

To say that the study of 'heroines' and their place in historical narratives is a complicated endeavour, one fraught with many challenges, would be an understatement. For a feminist historian such as myself, one very basic task was that of 'uncovering' and 'restoring' women's activities, experiences, and identities to the historical record, while simultaneously engaging with the ongoing creation of the category 'woman' and its relationship to other categories and identities: class, race and ethnicity, religion, and so on. Moreover, in the case of a woman such as Secord, matters are no less challenging because her image and narrative have been deployed in the creation of 'national' and imperial narratives and representations and her justification as a person of historical significance has been intimately linked to her service to the nation. While some might see this as a cause for celebration – at the very least legitimization of their subject – I viewed it as a test of my skills as a historian and scholar of gender and culture. I leave it to my peers and colleagues to determine how well I have succeeded in providing some kind of 'unified' exploration of these identities, relationships, and locations. What concerns me more here are some of the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in the study of 'heroines,' not to mention the political nuances that overlay all of the above.

First, 'finding' Secord was the most basic and, yet, the most unsolvable task of this research. To be sure, certain biographical details exist that allowed me to sketch out the contours of her life. I can tell you her (approximate) date of birth, her family background, the date of her arrival in Upper Canada, the date and fact of her marriage to James Secord, and the number of children she bore. I can tell you about her walk to warn James Fitzgibbon, although as I have argued elsewhere that narrative is not without its own vagaries, inconsistencies, and blurred edges. And I can tell you something about her life 'post-walk': her struggle to gain state recognition, her attempts to help support her family given her husband's disability, not to mention her widowed daughters' and their children's move back to the family home, along with their children. And I would argue that it is not inconsequential to be able to narrate that much of an Upper Canadian woman's life, even when the woman was white and of 'middling' status.

Yet there are many other dimensions of Secord's life, particularly questions surrounding her own subjectivity, which remain hidden and at present are lost to the curious historian. In all likelihood, they will remain obscured. I cannot tell you, for example, how she experienced and remembered her 'walk' in any way outside of the public domain of service to the colonial state and British Empire: all I have are her petitions to the Crown which, not surprisingly, stress duty, loyal service, and her family's needs. In themselves these petitions may somehow seem to 'complete' the story – in that, as I have argued, they let us see how she framed her narrative– but I would suggest that they represent only fragments of the historical record, testimony to the power of the colonial state and to the specific kinds of linkages of public and private in this period. I cannot tell you, for example, precisely what Secord herself made of the occupation of American troops – her former countrymen – of her village and, it seems, home, nor can I do more than speculate as to how she might have weighed and assessed her responsibilities as a wife and, in particular, mother (although I do know that some of her commemorators were keen to reconcile these aspects of her life with her loyal service).

CECILIA MORGAN

Cecilia Morgan is Assistant Professor and Associate Chair in the department of Theory and Political Studies at OISE/UT. This paper is based on her work on the commemoration of Laura Secord, published in Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan, Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchéres and Laura Secord (University of Toronto Press, 2002).

Secord's body is yet another dimension of this narrative that alerts us to absences and silences. Her commemorators, particularly women such as Curzon and Currie, were eager to write about the marks of such service on Secord's body: her innate frailty and slightness of stature, her bleeding feet, the exhaustion she suffered, the heat and insects of late June, and the trepidation and fear she experienced. In doing so it might be said that they turned her body into an archive of knowledge of the sacrifices heroines endured; certainly in their accounts her body became a historical artefact, as much a 'source' that testified to her walk as any political or military document. But we have no idea how she experienced any of this. Was the walk a daunting physical struggle for her? Did her feet in fact bleed? The answer may well be yes to both questions, yet she had also borne and raised a number of children and perhaps had endured miscarriages and/or stillbirths; early nineteenth-century childbirth was itself a test of physical endurance for women such as Secord. It is impossible to know how she incorporated and ranked the trek to Beaverdams in what might have been a lexicon of gynecological and other kinds of physical sufferings endured by women in this period.

Moreover, her fear was said to have encompassed wild animals, American soldiers, and Aboriginal warriors; as I have argued elsewhere, it was the latter who, her commemorators argued, both concerned her the most and allowed Secord to demonstrate her 'heroic' qualities. Yet, apart from a few references in some of her petitions to her trepidation and alarm upon discovering the Mohawk camp, I can do no more than speculate about her conceptions of Native peoples and her understanding of the role played by the Iroquois in the War of 1812. For example, it is possible that, as a child in Barrington, Massachusetts, Secord had been exposed to New England's narratives of white captivity at the hands of Natives and had come to see them as a group to be feared and mistrusted. Yet it is also possible that she had some contact with those Native peoples who might have been hunting and trading in the Niagara Peninsula. Moreover, given her husband's military service, particularly his involvement at Queenston Heights, she may have been aware that certain Native men, at least, were allies and not enemies of the British.

The determination of her story by the state and empire, the place of domesticity and maternity, the embodiment and corporeality of this narrative, and the place of racial fears, fantasies, and relationships are only a few of the questions and themes that impinge upon any attempt to find the 'real' Laura Secord and the 'true' narrative. Less discussed, but still important, is the question of labour. Secord's walk could well have been perceived as 'work' for Crown and colony and acknowledged as a spectrum of physical toil that also incorporated her labour for her family, particularly the nursing care – itself a very common form of women's work – expended in looking after her semi-invalid husband. To be sure, her commemorators often linked her physical sacrifice in getting to Beaverdams to her (quite likely imagined) defense of the wounded James on the Queenston Heights battlefield and argued that she had shielded him to prevent his being fatally stabbed. Some were not afraid to depict Secord as a 'hard-working' wife and mother, part of Niagara pioneer life: witness the ubiquitous and fictive cow. Yet it was equally and, for some, even more important that Secord's femininity, class, and racial identity be aligned in ways that would depict her as a 'lady.' Thus some commemorators added black servants, or her love of Lieutenant Governor's balls at Newark, and substituted silk gowns and thin slippers for plain cotton dresses and sensible shoes. Feminine consumption and love of 'finery' could be managed and controlled and could be an acceptable companion to nation and empire. Once more, Secord's own fantasies and desires lie buried.

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Thus, while I am unable to do anything more than simply point to absences, Secord's commemorators were far more optimistic. Using genres and methodologies other than the kind of 'scientific' history I have been trained to practice and produce, writers such as Sarah Curzon, Emma Currie, John Price-Brown, and Merrill Denison, blended prose and poetry, history and literature, to produce a Secord who was much more than the sum of a historian's sources. And while we have argued in *Heroines and History* that their imaginings were criss-crossed by conceptions of gender, race, empire, and nation, we also have tried to point out that the issue is simply not just that of writing 'bad' history. Instead, we must recognize that Secord's commemorators conceptualized their tasks in ways both similar to and different from our notions of creating historical narratives. And yet I return once again to the problem of studying Secord and her commemoration: was there any other way of examining her life and its significance without the framework of 'the nation?' Could they have told her story with another theoretical structure that would not have

relegated her experiences to the realm of not just 'the private' domain but that of the domestic, which in that context might well have been viewed as the realm of trivia?

Yet trying to construct a 'Laura Secord' whose narrative was not built on the scaffold of English-Canadian nationalism is not the only challenge or question. We have argued in *Heroines and History* that both Madeleine de Verchères and Secord's story are dependent on the presence and, at times, absence of the Iroquois; hence our narratives about these 'heroines' creation had to tackle the intermingling of nationalism with imperialism. And, as I searched for and found Secord's commemorators, I became increasingly aware that not all those active in the creation of 'Canadian' historical memory were white and middle class. While not engaged in Secord's commemoration, Iroquois historians such as John Brant-Sero, Ethel Brant Monture, Bernice Loft, and Elliott Moses, crafted narratives of both Native societies and 'Canada' that at times engaged with those of the historical societies, the builders of monuments, and the writers of textbooks.

At other times, the histories told by Native historians followed different trajectories and sought to tell a different story. Their work can be and, I would argue, should be seen as not merely a triumphant narrative of subaltern peoples' agency, although their agency and resistance should not be overlooked. But equally important is their complex, if fraught, relationship with both the Canadian nation-state and the modernity that these historical narratives engaged in and helped create. I would argue that this point is relevant even when we are faced with the issue of these narrators and their narratives' partial absences from the dominant theatres in which much of English Canada's narratives were dreamed of, rehearsed, and enacted. To be sure, the historical memories created and told by historians such as Brant-Sero and Monture are not so much historical memories that 'failed' (as one might argue de Verchères' narrative does today) but, instead, they took shape in forms and locations both similar to and different from those chosen by Secord's commemorators. For example, at times their archive was the public imperial and national one favoured by English-Canadian historians. However, their archive also could take an embodied form, as historians such as Brant-Sero, Monture, and Loft performed history, using narrative in conjunction with Iroquois poetry, music, and dance. It may well be that their labour as historians – or some facets of it – succeeded in either uniting the seemingly disparate elements of 'private' and 'public,' 'home' and 'nation,' better than their non-Native contemporaries. And it is worth considering that such designations and categories might have had very little or possibly even no meaning for them in the first place.

But to return to Laura Secord and the question of 'heroines.' We argue in the conclusion of *Heroines and History* that the latter and its creators treat the former more harshly and subject them to a greater degree of scrutiny that that meted out to 'heroes.' And while I do not of course disagree with this observation, since the book's publication I have been forced to think about contemporary meanings of Secord's story, in ways that other work I have published has not forced me to return and reflect on my own scholarship. To no small extent my repetition and reiteration of these issues has been because of issues of reception, that great question for cultural historians: both of *Heroines and History* and my own writing of history as public discourse and knowledge. Rather than being something 'over and done with,' Secord's memory and life continue to be narrated and recreated: in schools, in books for girls, and in her descendants, a number of whom have attended the public talks I have given in the Niagara area and who are themselves bridges between the domains of history and memory. The reception of the book has made me wonder if Secord's narrative and the story of her commemoration is more relevant, more 'alive,' and more central to these audiences than individuals such as Isaac Brock or those others who figured so prominently in 'traditional' political and military history. For these audiences, it seems, the image and narrative of Laura Secord bridges the public and private, the nation and the home, and provides them with a 'better story' with which to construct past and present (and possibly even future). But that would be a subject of a future, and another, study.



Laura Secord in the 21st Century: Advertising the Angel Inn's Best Bitter, Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Artist: Mary LittleJohn-Gillespie