

# Lasting differences

DAVID ARMITAGE

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A Ian Taylor *THE CIVIL WAR OF 1812* American citizens, British subjects, Irish rebels, and Indian allies 620pp.

Knopf. \$35. 978 1 4000 4265 4 “The War of 1812 looms

small in American memory”, writes Alan Taylor, who has now produced almost the longest and by far the most illuminating study of the conflict. It looms even smaller in British memory. “The War of 1812? What did Britain and America have to fight about in 1812?”, the great historian Lawrence Stone once asked. Canadians might recall it for the American destruction of York, now Toronto. And if Americans remember it at all, it is for the British burning of the Capitol and the White House, the origins of the Star-Spangled Banner at the siege of Fort McHenry in 1814, or Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans in January 1815, allegedly after peace had been signed.

The Civil War of 1812 devotes only half a line each to the American national anthem and the arson of Washington, DC, and it swiftly debunks the myth of the battle of New Orleans. (The treaty had indeed been signed, but not yet ratified.) Taylor focuses instead on a region he has made very much his own in a string of prize-winning books: the northeastern borderland between the United States and Canada. The bulk of the fighting took place between Detroit and Montreal, where the inter-imperial frontier formed the early nineteenth-century equivalent of the 38th Parallel, a tense boundary between two opposed ideologies: in this case, hierarchical British monarchism and rambunctious American republicanism. Four cross-border peoples there - the emergent Americans, British colonists, Native Americans and immigrant Irish who arrived after 1798 - fought among themselves even as they collided with each other.

As a British lieutenant confessed to an American officer in 1813, it was all “uncomfortably like a civil war”.

The War of 1812 was in fact rather like the last British civil war, or first “American civil war”, in which fellow English-speakers had defended their competing conceptions of political authority and autonomy. The end of the American War of Independence in 1783 propelled nearly 40,000 Loyalists into Canada from the United States. They were joined between 1792 and 1812 by some 30,000 “Late Loyalists” drawn to the newly founded British province of Upper Canada (now Southern Ontario) by the promise of cheap land and low taxes.

British authorities refused to accept the American assumption that citizenship was voluntary and continued to believe that Britons - even those who now thought themselves Americans - retained their birthright subjecthood forever. Upper Canada soon had a majority population drawn from the United States, while their masters back in Britain still saw most Americans, especially American sailors, as perpetual members of the Empire. It would take a war to resolve these differences by finally affirming American independence and securing the king’s subjects in Canada against the allure of what Admiral Sir George Cranfield Berkeley called “the Glittering Tinsel of American Freedom”.

American freedom may have been levelling but it was also racially stratified. Indians were potential allies for the British Empire wherever they lived, even in American territory; for the United States, they were dependents to be removed or absorbed, just as the enslaved could not be trusted to fight even when Americans were drastically shorthanded.

Britain also needed cannon-fodder during its wars with Napoleon, and impressed 11,000 American sailors for its navy. All these differences sparked America's first war of choice in response to "British spoliations, British impressments, British intrigues with the Indians, and British murders", but also meant that its ill-disciplined and poorly funded forces fought with one hand tied behind their backs.

Taylor studs his richly detailed and impeccably researched narrative with lively penportraits of the political and military leaders on each side and with dramatic accounts of the many inconclusive sieges, burnings and battles that scarred the borderland. Yet he always keeps the bigger picture, both British and American, in view. His treatments of Native Americans, of ordinary soldiers and of prisoners of war, are groundbreaking contributions to indigenous history and the new social history of war respectively. He shows how the conflict settled the borders of two states, stabilized previously fluid national identities, and consigned Native Americans to their fate as "domestic dependent nations" inside the United States.

The War of 1812 closed one phase of the American Revolution by determining once and for all who was British and who was not in North America. What it could not do was decide how many states would occupy the continent. Although Taylor ends his Canadian story in 1867 with Confederation, he wisely resists including the Confederacy in his American narrative. A series of sesquicentennials of events in the US Civil War, from secession in 1860 to surrender in 1865, has already begun to loom over the American historical landscape. The Civil War of 1812 is a timely reminder that that epochal conflict was not the first, or even the second, civil war fought in anglophone America.