



Pierre Berton Author Study

The War of 1812



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Teacher Information

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The Unnecessary War

The War of 1812 was a small war and often has been considered as an unnecessary one. Most of the battles were only skirmishes between small bands of men. One of the largest battles was fought after the peace treaty had been signed. Neither side knew that the war was over! The war ended with both sides claiming victory, although neither country gained any of each other's territory. Although this war was small and appeared unnecessary, it marks an important chapter in Canada's history. It proved that with Britain's help Canada could hold her own against an enemy.

Trouble in Europe

In order to understand the War of 1812, we must travel back in time to Europe. In France, the French people had overthrown their king and a General named Napoleon Bonaparte became the Emperor of France. He was a brilliant organizer and military leader but also a ruthless tyrant. France's armies under his leadership conquered and overran the countries of western Europe.

Britain was the only obstacle in Napoleon's path in order for him to have total domination of all Europe. The French armies were supreme on land but Britain's navies dominated the seas during the Napoleonic Wars.

During these wars Britain relied heavily on her ships. Life at sea in those days was not easy and it was difficult to maintain crews on board a navy vessel. Discipline was harsh, food was bad and the pay was poor. Men were often forced into service by press-gangs and many of them tried to desert whenever the opportunity arose. British ships often stopped other ships to search for these "deserters" or runaways. It was one of these searches that led to one of the causes of the War of 1812.

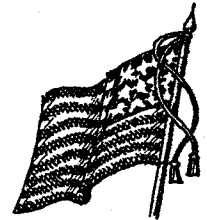
The Chesapeake Affair

In 1807, a British warship demanded that the United States frigate Chesapeake permit them to search for British naval deserters. When the American captain refused the demand, the British fired three broadsides, killing and wounding some Americans. The Chesapeake lowered her colours (U.S. flag) and the British dragged off four sailors they claimed to be deserters.



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The badly damaged Chesapeake limped back to port slowly. The Americans were furious when they heard about the British attack. They were even more furious when they found out that only one of the men taken was actually a British soldier and the rest were American citizens. The Americans would not forget this treatment.

Trade Restrictions

Sometimes wars are fought by starving out the enemy instead of fighting battles. In 1806, Napoleon Bonaparte issued the Berlin Decrees, which ordered all ports on the continent not to allow British ships to unload their goods. This action hurt Britain's trade since most of her goods went to Europe. The British responded by drawing up the Orders in Council. This document stated that if any European countries obeyed Napoleon's orders their ports would be blockaded and no vessels would be allowed to enter.

The Americans wanted no part of Britain and France's trade battle but still wanted to trade with all the nations. President Jefferson did not want to take sides and tried to persuade Britain and France to remove or modify their restrictions. Neither country would give in.

Some American traders decided to risk the chance of being caught by either country because the profits were high. Many of them were caught by the British navy because it controlled the sea approaches to Europe. This was another reason to be angry with the British.

Canada, The West and The War Hawks

After the American Revolution many settlers had been moving into the West. The Native People had been defeated in 1794 and in the same year the British gave up their control of the western forts in the United States. The pioneers felt they could now travel safely and the threat of being attacked by the Natives was gone.

Unfortunately this false sense of security soon disappeared as the Native People had developed a new spirit. They had new leaders who were watching white settlers taking over their large tracts of land. The Native leaders knew they had to take a new stand or they would be pushed out of the prairie country. A Shawnee chief called Tecumseh set out to organize all the Native tribes.

At the same time a group of young Congressmen called the "War Hawks" led by Henry Clay, the new Speaker of the House of Representatives were organizing themselves to attack Canada. They felt that Canada must be taken from Britain because the British were encouraging the Natives to slaughter the new pioneers travelling west. The farmers in the north of the United States wanted the land in Canada as well. The western farmers were hurt by England and France's decrees as well as by the American Embargo. They could not sell their farm products overseas and the farmers blamed the British for their hard times.



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Tippecanoe

The War of 1812 actually began in the backwoods. The Native People were reminded constantly by Tecumseh and his brother Lalawethike, "the Prophet", that they must unite and fight to prevent the American pioneers from advancing into their territory. They organized a great confederacy of Native tribes to block the westward movement of the American pioneers.

In 1811, the governor of the Indiana Territory, William Henry Harrison, gathered a military force to break up the Native Confederacy. First of all he planned to destroy the Native capital on Tippecanoe Creek. He led his men to Vincennes and camped about a mile from the Native village. William Henry Harrison and his men were awakened by a surprise attack at dawn by the Native warriors. The Americans fought fiercely and drove the natives back and then set fire to the village and the food supply. The Americans declared the battle a great victory even though it wasn't. Harrison had failed to end the warlike activities of the Native tribes and their leaders. The Western Pioneers felt that they were in worse danger than before and they also felt the English in Canada were provoking and encouraging the Natives to kill the white settlers. The fact was that the English in Canada and the British Government had nothing to do with the warring attitude of the Natives and wanted peace on the frontier as much as the Americans.

War is Declared

The British refused to revoke their Orders in Council which gave the Americans a reason for going to war. President Madison called upon Congress for a declaration of war against England. Two days before Congress acted, Great Britain had announced that she had suspended her Orders in Council. Britain's grain crop had failed and the people were desperate for American grain.

Communication between countries depended on sailing ships to carry dispatches across the Atlantic Ocean. Congress did not know that it had declared war when there was no longer any reason for doing so. The English had acted too late.

The "War Hawks" felt that this war would be an easy one. They felt they could conquer Canada alone. America looked pretty strong. There were eight million Americans compared to a half million Canadians. The Canadians were not united and the French and English settlers spoke different languages. England had several concerns. Would the French Canadians be loyal to England? Could England spare the troops since England was fighting for her life against Napoleon? Would the Native People help fight on Canada's side?

The "War Hawks" had plenty of surprises in store for them. America was weaker than they thought. The army was small and scattered, poorly trained and unreliable. Her navy was



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quite small. Many of the military leaders were old and feeble generals. President Madison and his Cabinet showed poor leadership. Military operations were poorly planned. Many New Englanders were against the war and continued to trade with the British by smuggling goods northward into the colonies.

The War Department in the United States sent three expeditions against the Canadas during the first summer. One expedition was to enter Upper Canada from Detroit and a second was to cross the Niagara River. The third expedition was sent north along the route that many an army had tramped, the Hudson-Richelieu "gateway".

The Defenders

The Canadas were not as confident as the Americans. There were only 500 000 people living in the Canadas and the majority were French Canadians. It was doubtful at the time that they could be depended on to defend the British cause. In Upper Canada there were 80 000 people whose loyalty was uncertain. The Loyalists and the British immigrants could be counted upon but more than half of the population had come quite recently from the United States. To whom were they loyal?

When the Americans declared war there were 7 000 British troops in both the Canadas. The 41st Foot and some parts of other units were stationed in Upper Canada. They were strung out from Prescott to the Soo. The units consisted of a company here, a detachment there, manning the little forts of stone or logs that guarded the border.

There were five "fencible" regiments in Upper Canada. These were colonial troops who were liable for service only in Upper Canada. Lower Canada had only one regiment, the Canadian Voltigeurs.

Our militia consisted of all able-bodied men who were enrolled in it only on paper. These men only trained as a rule for one day in the year. On June 4th, which was King George the Third's birthday, they would answer roll call, practise a few drill movements and end the day by getting drunk at their officer's expense.

Major-General Isaac Brock had the duty and responsibility of defending Upper Canada in his hands. He was a British officer who had been posted here with his regiment in 1802. His duty confined him to a dull routine in this unexciting colony. Brock was a strict but wise commander, a professional soldier who knew the geography and the people of the colony as well as he knew his officers and men.

Major-General Brock was responsible to Sir George Prevost, at Quebec, who was the Governor and Commander-in-Chief in Lower Canada. He could send help to Brock but it