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The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies

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The War of 1812 has the unfortunate fate of being wedged between two of the most greatly studied events of modern world history, the American Revolution and Civil War. Indeed, the looming bicentennial of the 1812 conflict promises to be overshadowed by year two of the Civil War sesquicentennial. Yet one can hope that Alan Taylor?s remarkably researched and cogently argued book will ignite scholarly and even public interest in this conflict. Taylor?s superb study promises to reshape not only our understanding of the second and last Anglo-American conflict, but also the broader story concerning the new political structures that emerged from the British imperial crisis of the late 18th century.

At the heart of Taylor?s richly detailed study is what he calls the ?northern borderland? that stretches from Detroit in the west to Montreal in the east. This strategic zone was the site of a post-revolutionary 'cold war' between the newly independent United States and its former colonial master (p. 28). Neither the Americans nor the British were content with the 1783 settlement that concluded the American War of Independence. American statesmen of the Jeffersonian persuasion viewed Canada as a menacing outpost of monarchical colonialism that was paradoxically populated by proto-republicans who yearned to be liberated; British imperialists, such as Upper Canada's Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe, sought to consolidate a 'counterrevolutionary regime in Canada? that eventually would become strong enough to rollback American

republicanism (p. 5). Simcoe is one of many long neglected figures who emerge as an important actor in *The Civil War of 1812*.

Taylor shows how the competition for hearts and minds in the borderlands fueled imperial innovation on both sides of the porous northern border. The American 1787 Northwest Ordinance, which promised republican government and political equality to settlers in that region, and the de-centralized Constitution of the same year are well known to American historians. Less recognized is Britain?s rejoinder. The Canada Constitutional Act of 1791, which divided Quebec into the new provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, created ?a mixed constitution meant to attract American settlers while minimizing their political activity? in order to maintain British control (pp. 42?3). Simcoe's 1792 proclamation further enticed some 30,000 'late loyalists' from America to the newly created Upper Canada by granting each immigrant family 200 acres of land and the promise of low taxes, a lesson learnt from 1776. In return, settlers had to take an oath of allegiance to the King and Parliament. By 1812 these ?Late Loyalists? from America comprised 60 per cent of the population of Upper Canada. If the American mantra in the borderlands was political equality and republican liberty, that of Britain was economic opportunity premised upon law, order, and colonial stability.

Despite the ideological divisions of this post-revolutionary ?cold war,? relative tranquility prevailed in the borderland in the decades after 1783 (at least between white settlers). The inhabitants of this area were mostly small farmers whose chief ambition was to own land and profit from its exploitation. Taylor argues that most individual settlers, particularly those on the Canadian side of the border, simply wanted peace and to be left alone to tend to their personal affairs. But the perceived insecurity of both sides in an era of geopolitical instability undermined this tentative truce. Americans feared that Indians remained the pawns of the British, who maintained control of several forts within American territory until the late 1790s. Furthermore, the escalation of partisan conflict of the First Party System led many Jeffersonian Republicans to conclude that the Federalists were the lackeys of the British enemy. Rooting out the ?counter-revolutionaries? in Canada, in this formulation, became necessary to prevent their ascendency within the republic itself. British Canadians, on the other hand, feared the infiltration of republican ideas, which became a pressing concern in light of the high number of British troops who deserted southward across the border.

Taylor makes clear that the American desire to annex Canada was not the sole, or even primary, motive for the US declaration of war in 1812. After all, the vote on Madison?s war message is best explained by party affiliation, rather than region or expansionist intentions. Taylor contends that the US declaration of war must be understood in light of ?the *synergy* of multiple grievances in producing an explosive combination of fear and loathing by Republicans of Britons and Indians? (p. 135). He further argues that the various causes of the conflict ? impressment, the Orders in Council, contestation in the northern borderlands, and the fear of Native Americans ? all ?pivoted on the contentious boundary between the king?s subject and the republic?s citizen? (p. 4).

Taylor?s portrayal of the northern borderland during the 1812 conflict is one of great complexity, justifying the over-arching framework of ?civil war?: brother fought brother on the contested Niagara front and loyalties were in a constant state of flux; Irish immigrants to America brought with them their hatred of England and took the fight against the British Empire to Canada (that being said, many Irishmen also fought for the British); Indians also fought for both sides, though most allied with Britain in hopes of containing the expansionist republic that most coveted their lands; within the United States, partisan conflict threatened the American union itself, not least in the borderlands where Federalists undermined the war effort through smuggling and political dissent.

Taylor?s rich and detailed analysis exposes the crudeness of prevailing interpretations of the conflict that are premised upon monolithic national categories. Yet *The Civil War of 1812* shows how the very messiness of the conflict paradoxically hardened the borderline between Canada and the United States. The bloody and destructive nature of the conflict itself is of great importance in this regard. Before the conflict, Taylor argues that the new settlers in Upper Canada were largely apolitical and interested mostly in their own economic fortunes. But many turned toward the British during the conflict. This was in part a result of the

American failure to persuade Canadians that they would be better off in the United States. Statesmen in Washington never outlined their vision for Canada, nor offered annexation on the terms of political equality. Poor American military strategy also undermined the American invasion. In an interesting section, Taylor shows that the United States focused its limited resources and manpower on the peripheral Detroit and Niagara fronts instead of the more important St. Lawrence Valley due to the need to satisfy wealthy American David Parish who loaned money to the US government on the condition that the conflict would not endanger his landholdings in the valley. But it was the many American depredations in the region during the war that most turned the settlers of Upper Canada toward the British ? the burning of the Canadian towns of York and Newark; widespread looting and confiscation of private property; particularly savage conflict with native peoples. ?To woo Upper Canadians,? Taylor writes, ?the American generals posed as liberators, but their men behaved too much like the ruthless plunderers described by British propaganda? (p. 12).

Despite the failure of the American invasions of Canada, Taylor contends that the United States ultimately emerged as the victors of the civil war of 1812. The conflict consolidated America?s grip on its 1783 borders and established its hegemony over native peoples in both the Northwest and the Southwest. British statesmen never again would challenge the territorial integrity of the United States. In a brief but compelling discussion of Andrew Jackson and the Southwest, Taylor rebukes the old notion that the US victory at New Orleans was of little consequence given that it occurred after the signing (though not ratification) of the peace treaty. The American triumph in New Orleans made clear to British statesmen the costs of warring with the United States, as well as helped to foster a powerful, patriotic nationalism in a union that had threatened to dissolve from within during the New England Federalist convention in Hartford, Connecticut in 1814. The American nationalism unleashed by the conflict found a counterpart north of the border. In both places, imagined nationalist memories of the war justified the post-war suppression of internal political dissent. ?The ultimate legacy of the war was that the empire and the republic would share the continent along a more clearly defined border more generous to the Americans and more confining to the British ? but most ominous to the Indians? (p. 439).

The contributions of Taylor?s work to our understanding of early American history are many. It shall further prompt historians to view America?s struggle for independence as an ongoing and multifaceted process that lasted well into the nineteenth century. The book makes clear that the War of 1812 was a continuation of the American Revolution: it entailed geopolitical and citizenship issues that the 1783 peace treaty left unresolved, as well as fueled the anti-colonial nationalism (and colonial nationalism in the case of Canada) that filled the vacuum created by the partial dissolution of British authority in North America. This book also sheds fresh light on long-neglected questions of social history. In a particularly illuminating chapter, Taylor shows how independent-minded American citizens struggled to adapt to the regimentation and discipline required of military service. Furthermore, the book introduces a new cast of characters whose lives should be further explored. Though the book succeeds in wedding high politics with the messy story on the ground, it nonetheless makes clear that the stories of the borderlands and imperial expansion are ones in which metropolitan actors had very limited control.

The Civil War of 1812 also sheds new light on what Taylor calls ?a new ?Canadian? nationality? (p. 171). American aggression and looting helped solidify loyalism, which received an added boost by British migration patterns in the post-1815 period. But Taylor also suggests that this British/Canadian nationalism was rooted in the decades before the 1812 war and was defined in largely negative terms: ?Britons defined Upper Canada as a set of absences: as free from the social and political pathologies attributed to the United States? (p. 71). America thus played a role in the emergence of Canadian identity not unlike that which Britain played in the emergence of early American nationalism.

Taylor?s conclusion emphasizes the rigidity of the border after 1815. Britain?s grip on Canada was never seriously challenged again in the 19th century, either from within or without. Both sides consolidated their positions on their respective side of the border. British leaders rejected Simcoe?s old strategy of attracting American settlers to Canada and instituted a rigid naturalization process to guard against republican infiltration. This reviewer had a couple of questions on this point. First, to what extent did the ?hardening? of the border shut down the economic connections of the earlier period, which of course persisted during the

conflict via smuggling and lived on in a later (if ephemeral) period of reciprocal trade in the mid 19th century? Second, in what ways did the hardening of the border in the Detroit/Niagara region extend to other areas that did not witness the same carnage during 1812?4? What of the St. Lawrence Valley, which saw less fighting and where smuggling was rampant during the conflict, as well places further afield such as Maine and, later, the Northwest? In other words, Taylor?s study should prompt future scholars to examine how the attitudes and divisions established before and during the 1812 conflict expanded across the emerging US-Canadian border.

The division of the continent in the first decades of the 19th century into British and American zones (as well as Mexican) is of undeniable importance. Yet a sub-theme in Taylor?s work concerns the convergence of the racial attitudes and policy towards native peoples on either side of the border. Though white Americans and Canadians developed no small amount of animus toward one another during the 1812 conflict, this paled in comparison to their shared fear of the native peoples they deemed to be uncivilized. Taylor makes clear that the hardening of the border undermined the position of native peoples on both sides. Freed from the need to defend a border that both sides now accepted, American and Britons repudiated wartime Indian alliances and initiated policies that aimed to dispossess the Indians of their land and transform their way of life. The convergences between the old enemies might be taken further. The gradual introduction of ?responsible government,? or ?home rule,? kept Canada in the British Empire, yet it echoed the American model of granting autonomy to settlers on the periphery as called for in the Northwest Ordinance. In this regard, Taylor?s wonderful book is not only epilogue to the American Revolution, but is also prologue to the 19th century story of Anglo-American rapprochement and imperial reciprocity.

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