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Cecilia Morgan ^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: cecilia.morgan@utoronto.ca

¹ Ontario Institute for the Study of Education, University of Toronto, Canada

Remembering 1812 in the 1840s: John Richardson and the Writing of the War

*Cecilia Morgan**

Abstract

Soldier, traveller, writer, and journalist John Richardson's 1840 history of the War of 1812, along with his novel, *The Canadian Brothers*, also published in 1840, were some of the first written efforts by Upper Canadians to craft histories of the conflict. Richardson drew heavily on his own experiences as a young soldier during this time, mixing autobiography and documentary sources to craft his history; he also drew on his childhood in the Windsor-Detroit area for his novel. His work drew attention to the conflict in the southwestern area of the colony, a region at times overlooked in the War's public memory in favour of the Niagara peninsula. Richardson's accounts of the War of 1812 are notable for a number of reasons. Richardson himself was a highly mobile figure in the imperial and transatlantic world of the British military: his writings are part of the context of broader discussions of the Napoleonic Wars. Equally importantly, Richardson's work highlights the effects of war on men's bodies and their deployment in wartime struggle. His history and novel tell us much about discourses of masculinity in wartime, both European and Indigenous.

It is a humiliating, yet undeniable fact, that there are few young men of the present generation who are at all aware, except by vague and inaccurate report, of the brilliant feats of arms, and sterling loyalty displayed by their immediate progenitors, during the stern but brief struggle with the neighboring Republic. . . . Or, if they have read of these matters, their information has been derived through the corrupt channel of American party publications

bearing on the subject, all of which have a tendency to pervert facts, and to instil into the youthful mind that diffidence and mistrust which operate as a check upon the generous aspirations, and weaken the energies of the national character.¹

With this appeal to historical accuracy and patriotism, John Richardson opened his history of the War of 1812. Over 300 pages long, Richardson's twelve-chapter history was one of the first lengthy attempts by an Upper Canadian to craft a narrative of the War, particularly as it was fought in the southern portion of the colony.

In it, and in his other historical writing, Richardson was motivated by various ambitions, his work shaped by multiple goals. As well as setting the historical record straight for Upper Canadian youth, his history was marked by the traumas and triumphs of the conflict, ones that had left their mark on him and on his historical subjects. In his history, Richardson also demonstrated the permeability of history-writing's boundaries in this period, as he shifted from the dispassionate, disembodied voice of the omniscient spectator to an intensely personal and embodied autobiographical mode. Furthermore, Richardson's novel of the War, *The Canadian Brothers*, built on his history of the events of 1812; it also, though, expanded its chronological sweep and delved even further into the relationship between the realm of the battlefield and that of the early nineteenth-century family, the tribulations and triumphs of one inflecting and reflecting those of the other.

Born in (probably) Queenston in 1796, his father Robert, a British military surgeon, and his mother Madelaine Askin, the mixed-race daughter of fur trader John Askin, Richardson was raised in both the Niagara and Detroit frontiers. He fought for the British from 1812 to 1813 and saw considerable action on both sides of the border, although all of this ended when he was taken prisoner at the Battle of Moraviantown and sent to Kentucky. On his release at the War's end, Richardson served in Europe and the West Indies; he also spent time in Paris and London in the 1820s and 1830s, returning to Upper Canada's Western District to help suppress the Rebellion of 1837. A series of 'misfortunes' in Canada West saw him depart for the United States in 1849; he died in New York City in 1852.²

Although Richardson's military career marked much of his life, he also sought to make a living as a writer. To be sure, he admitted that he had always 'detested school,' a place that for him represented constant suffering – not the least of it physical. 'I had been oftener flogged than the greatest dunce in it, perhaps as much from the caprice of my

tutor as from any actual wrong in myself.’ This treatment left him with ‘such a disgust for Virgil, Horace, and Euclid, that I often meditated running away.’ However, fear of his father – ‘a stern, unbending man’ – restrained Richardson from taking such action. Much to his delight, the outbreak of War was a ‘day of rejoicing’ for him; the arrival of American troops meant the breakup of his school and his exchange of *Caesar’s Commentaries* for the *King’s Regulations*. ‘The transition was indeed glorious, and, in my joy at the change which had been wrought in my position, I felt disposed to bless the Americans for the bold step they had taken.’³ Yet even if his early experiences had soured Richardson on formal education, he was eager to commit his thoughts and experiences to paper; his publications also included *Wacousta; or, The Prophecy, a Tale of the Canadas*, other fiction set in Europe, an account of Upper Canadian political history from 1838 to 1848, and the short-lived newspaper, *Canadian Loyalist, or Spirit of 1812*.⁴ While not all of his published work, then, focused on the history of Upper Canada or the War of 1812, both the place and the event had captured his novelist’s and historian’s imagination.

By the time Richardson wrote his history, the War’s public memory and the structures of its official commemoration focused on battlefields and, in particular, the heroic sacrifice of Isaac Brock at Queenston Heights. As Patricia Jasen’s study of early nineteenth-century tourism in Ontario has demonstrated, Lundy’s Lane, Fort George, and other Niagara-area battlefields were – along with Niagara Falls – some of the colony’s earliest tourist attractions.⁵ As well, tributes to 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 memorials that commemorated the battle of Queenston Heights, and in early textbooks.⁶ Other figures also captured the imaginations of colonial society. As Guy St.-Denis has pointed out, reports of an American vandalizing the (supposed) grave of Shawnee chief Tecumseh in 1840 led to calls for a monument to his memory and to a lengthy and protracted search for his remains, one in which John Richardson participated.⁷ Moreover, on the American side of the border, debates over the War’s meaning and significance had taken place even before the Treaty of Ghent had been signed.⁸

Literary scholar Desmond Pacey has described Richardson as ‘an isolated figure in the early history’ of Ontario literature, one who lacked a ‘current of ideas to sustain him,’ who had ‘no depth in the cultural soil in which his roots were set.’ Such an analysis does not take into account Richardson’s place in the production of history in British

North America or his relationship to the wider contexts of historical writing during this period.⁹ After all, Richardson's text was not the first account to be produced in Upper Canada, as in 1832 Niagara resident David Thompson, a former soldier and, by then, teacher, published his *A History of the Late War between Great Britain and the United States of America*. Thompson's text was intended to give the present generation the chance to 'review the terrific glories of those fields of blood and carnage,' thus allowing widows and orphans to 'survey the transcendent achievements of their husbands and fathers' and, like Richardson's work, to stir up patriotic sentiments for the colony's youth.¹⁰ As well, it is more than likely that during his time in England Richardson became aware of the statutes, paintings, and services that memorialized Britain's defeat of France in 1815.¹¹ Thus, in his desire to provide a narrative of the events of 1812–1813, Richardson participated in colonial, transatlantic, and imperial dialogues about the effects of the Napoleonic Wars, his participation mediated by a focus on the War's specific and local effect.

To be sure, Richardson's *History* was not a comprehensive or all-encompassing narrative of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada, nor did he intend it to be. Although his geographic range spanned Michilmackinac to Queenston Heights, and took in the destruction of the British fleet on Lake Erie, Richardson concentrated most of his work on the Detroit-Windsor frontier and the surrounding area, building up to the Battle of Mora-viantown, his capture by American troops, and his journey to Chillicothe in Ohio and then to Frankfurt, Kentucky. In the burgeoning commemorative landscape of southern Ontario, one which the Niagara frontier would dominate, Richardson's detailed attention to events such as Brock's capture of Fort Detroit, the Fort Wayne Expedition, and the Battles of Frenchtown and the Miami argued for the importance of places other than Stoney Creek, Chippewa, Fort Erie, and Niagara as significant theatres of war. In *Wacousta* and in *The Canadian Brothers*, Richardson drew a map of the War that trained his readers' eyes onto the western Great Lakes region. In so doing his work also foreshadowed that of late nineteenth-century commemorators, who argued that despite its entanglement in larger imperial and transatlantic power struggles, Upper Canada's experiences of 1812 had to be understood at the local level.¹²

Yet as much as Richardson wished to draw attention to the specificity of a particular place in which the War was conducted, telling his audience of military strategies, stirring triumphs, and heartbreaking defeats in that region, to an even greater extent his

was also an embodied war. In his history men's bodies are the subject of close scrutiny, their physical appearances signifying much about the multivalent nature of early nineteenth-century war's relationship to masculinity.¹³ At times these bodies are powerful yet personable symbols of British imperial honour: the most obvious one being, of course, that of Brock. While Richardson suspected that his readers might well know the other descriptions of the General that circulated within Upper Canada, nevertheless the lack of a portrait 'public or private' in 'the country' necessitated a 'slight written sketch.' 'Tall, stout, and inclining to corpulency,' Brock possessed a 'fair and florid complexion, had a large forehead, full face, but not prominent features, rather small, grayish-blue eyes, with a very slight cast in one of them – small mouth, with a pleasing smile, and good teeth.' As well as his stature and face, Brock's behaviour and character conveyed important messages. 'In manner he was exceedingly affable and gentlemanly, of a cheerful and social habit, partial to dancing, and although never married, extremely devoted to female society. Of the chivalry of his nature, and the soundness of his judgment, evidence enough has been given in the foregoing pages to render all comment thereon a matter of supererogation.'¹⁴

In his valorization of Brock's appearance and character, Richardson was, of course, not alone. Depicting Brock as a physically commanding, sagacious, and inspirational leader, as well as a courteous gentleman, was integral to his commemoration in nineteenth-century Ontario.¹⁵ Although Brock might serve as the most central and significant symbol of British physical courage and virtue, Richardson did not, though, stint in his appraisal of the physical bravery and courage demonstrated by other British officers or the Upper Canadian militia. At Queenston Heights, for example, Captain Dennis of the 49th Grenadiers was shot in the thigh, yet 'with characteristic *sang froid*, stopped the effusion of blood by thrusting his finger into the wound, and in that manner supported his share in the action to the last.'¹⁶ Youthful male bravery, particularly when displayed by a close relative and coupled with the ability to transcend horrible pain, also drew its share of praise. One of Richardson's most effusive passages was his description of his fourteen-year-old brother's conduct at the Battle of Frenchtown. A midshipman on Lake Erie, Robert ('the next and favorite brother of the author'), frustrated with the lack of opportunities to engage the enemy directly on water, left his ship to join the troops. Having disobeyed orders to stay behind the fighting, Robert was hit by a cannon ball which shattered his right leg.¹⁷ As John and Robert's father, Dr. Richardson,

was providing medical services on the field, Robert begged to be hidden so that his father would not discover him and was treated by another surgeon (whether out of fear of his father's wrath at his having disobeyed orders or because he did not wish to upset him is left to the reader's imagination). After enduring six months of 'intense' suffering that he bore with 'manly and enduring courage,' Robert was taken to Quebec, where he endeared himself to the British military hierarchy and was given a lieutenant's commission in the provincial corps. Although his wound led to his untimely death in 1819, 'this spirited youth had the cheering consolation to know that ... the noble ardor developed at so early a stage of his existence was not without its reward, in the approval of men whose high military rank and character invested their individual regard with a ten-fold value.' As proof of their approval, Richardson then went on to quote Sir John Harvey's 1839 reminiscence of the 'devoted boy.' In his capacity as Adjutant-General to the army in Canada, Harvey had met Robert and remembered his 'gallantry and merits,' as well as 'his sufferings,' all of which 'excited my warmest admiration and sympathies.'¹⁸

Richardson's younger and much-beloved brother might, of course, be expected to inspire such a portrait. Robert was not alone, though, in his ability to overcome physical suffering for a greater end. At Frenchtown, William Caldwell of Amherstburg found himself confronted by the treachery of an American officer. Caldwell had just rescued the officer from Indian warriors bent on scalping him and was taking him to the other prisoners when the officer took advantage of Caldwell's momentary distraction to draw his knife and 'springing upon his deliverer, made an incision along his throat, nearly from ear to ear.' Fortunately for Caldwell, the wound was shallow 'and Mr. Caldwell, who was extremely powerful and active, with great presence of mind, caught the arm which had attempted his destruction, and drawing forth a dagger ... thrust it repeatedly into the body of his assailant until death had freed him from all further apprehension – Mr. Caldwell's wound was soon healed.'¹⁹

Men's bodies, then, might testify to honourable sacrifices or an ability to quickly slough off the war's damaging effects. However, while Mr. Caldwell's body quickly shed the marks of conflict, others were not so fortunate. In the aftermath of Queenston Heights the 'body of the Hero of Canada' had been left behind in one of the village's homes, 'covered with a pile of old blankets in order to prevent any recognition by the enemy.'²⁰ To be sure, some men experienced war's depredations in a manner more farcical than tragic. In the August 1812 retreat

from the indigenous village of Maguaga, Lieutenant Sutherland was shot through the cheek by an American, a wound so severe that he was carried off the field of battle on a militia man's back. Despite the severity of his injury, though, Sutherland would have fully recovered 'had he not imprudently, some ten days afterward, made premature use of his toothbrush. This opened the wound, brought on hemorrhage, and before medical assistance could be procured (the main body of the force being then in occupation of Detroit), he bled to death.'²¹

Sutherland's unnecessarily premature demise aside, the depredations of war were just as likely to evoke disgust and repugnance, sentiments that often arose when Richardson was confronted by 'common' American soldiers. Taken prisoner at Frenchtown, they appeared 'miserable to the last degree. They had the air of men to whom cleanliness was a virtue unknown, and their squalid bodies were covered by habiliments that had evidently undergone every change of season, and were arrived at the last stages of repair.' Richardson showed some degree of empathy for men who had begun their campaign in summer clothing made of cotton and who now, in the depth of winter, lacked great coats and cloaks. Yet he also was repulsed by other aspects of their appearance: their 'slouched hats, worn bare by constant use, beneath which their long hair fell matted and uncombed over their cheeks; and those, together with the dirty blankets wrapped around their loins, to protect them from the inclemency of the season, and fastened by broad leather belts, into which were thrust axes and knives of an enormous length, gave them an air of wildness and savageness, which in Italy would have caused them to pass for brigands of the Apennines.' Moreover, while Richardson's work was marked by a general disdain for the 'various hordes of irregular troops' from Kentucky and Ohio, he remarked that little distinguished these men from their officers, except that the latter bore a short rifle and dagger instead of the common soldier's long rifle and knife.²²

The shabby and sordid appearance of the Kentuckians and Ohioans, though, paled in contrast to the bodily indignities suffered by Richardson and his fellow prisoners after their capture at Moraviantown. During their march to Ohio they slept on wet ground, lying in 'ankle-deep' mud and chilled with the cold.²³ Mounted on 'miserable pack horses, scarcely able to sustain their own weight' the prisoners endured more 'fatigue and privation' than Richardson could describe.²⁴ While some of the Americans they met treated them with courtesy and attempted to provide them with material comforts,²⁵ matters became even worse once they arrived at their prison in Frankfurt, Kentucky,

presided over by a 'ruffian like' gaoler. One member of their party was assaulted by the gaoler with a 'ponderous key,' and left with a head wound from which 'the blood gusht(ed) forth with extreme violence.'²⁶ After their plan to escape was discovered, the prisoners – Richardson excepted – were put in heavy iron handcuffs, which left them unable to change their clothes or 'perform their customary ablutions.' Worse still, their hands and wrists swelled up because of the cuffs' compression; several men were left with their fingers discoloured 'with the quantity of blood propelled to those parts.'²⁷ To crown their humiliation, the men then were 'paraded through the principal streets of the town,' a route both 'circuitous and unnecessary,' where they were greeted by the 'taunts and hisses' of the general population and, even worse, the 'triumphant disdain' of those 'with whom we had lately associated, and who had exercised the courtesies of hospitality' who believed a rumour that the prisoners had plotted to burn the town.²⁸ Although Richardson's narrative of torment and indignity ended in redemption with the War's end, the contrast between the coarseness of the American troops, one that Richardson hinted was a result of their own 'natural' proclivities, and the almost-Christ-like physical suffering endured by the British and Upper Canadian troops, helped to delineate the boundaries between the United States, Britain, and her colony. A soldier's body, then, could serve as a living metaphor for his country of origin and help delineate the border between rival nations and empires.

Richardson's desire to record the marks that armed conflict bore on men's bodies was not limited to those of white soldiers. Much of his history was preoccupied with the appearances and practices of Indigenous warriors, a group about whom he held a range of perspectives. Like the other subjects of his narrative, this was a world of men. An Indigenous woman makes a brief appearance in the book's first chapter, as she strikes an American prisoner with a tomahawk in revenge for the death of her nephew, a 'heartless' act that leads to the prisoner's death and dismemberment.²⁹ Overall, however, Richardson chose to focus on Indigenous men.

Although much of Richardson's discussion of Indigenous men was usually about nameless warriors, he singled out a few individuals. One of the most prominent was Tecumseh, whom Richardson presents as a worthy counterpart to Brock, both in his military abilities and in his physical presence and character. While Tecumseh makes a number of appearances in Richardson's narrative, his appearance and conduct at the Battle of the Miami in May 1813 was particularly noteworthy. After the battle, a 'few cowardly and treacherous Indians who had borne no

share in the action,' began to kill American prisoners: upon hearing of this, Tecumseh rode in and quickly stopped them. In this episode it was the force of Tecumseh's character that impressed Richardson, his mercy, magnanimity, courage, and ardor. 'In any other country, and governing any other men, Tecumseh would have been a hero,' Richardson believed. Yet while 'at the head of this uncivilized and untractable people he was a savage; but a savage such as civilization herself might not blush to acknowledge as her child.' Even the American General Harrison, who had met Tecumseh in battle, 'subsequently ascribed to him virtues as a man, and abilities as a warrior, commanding at once the attention and admiration of his enemies.'³⁰ Later in the book, after reprinting Tecumseh's speech on the eve of the Battle of Moraviantown, in which he adamantly refuted General Proctor's proposal for a retreat to Niagara, Richardson dwelt on Tecumseh's physical appearance at more length. While the assembled warriors, with their 'diversified costumes,' formed a 'striking contrast with the calm demeanour and military garb' of the British officers, the 'most prominent' was Tecumseh. 'Habited in a close leather dress, his athletic proportions were admirably delineated, while a large plume of white ostrich feathers, by which he was generally distinguished, overshadowing his brow, and contrasting with the darkness of his complexion and the brilliancy of his black and piercing eye, gave a singularly wild and terrific expression to his features. It was evident that he could be terrible.'³¹

Tecumseh, then, might fulfill Richardson's and his readers' fantasies of nobility tinged with savagery; but he was not alone. At the Battle of Miami Richardson was struck by Metoss, the head chief of the Sacs (Sauk). A 'tall, handsome man about six feet in height,' possessed features 'essentially classic and Roman' (as did his nation overall). 'When dressed, or rather undressed for battle, his body and limbs fantastically painted, and his head ornamented with a handsome circlet of feathers, his tall and commanding figure presented the very *beau ideal* of an Indian warrior.' While not as eloquent or intellectually gifted as Tecumseh, Metoss was nevertheless resolute, a 'sagacious and active' leader, firmly attached to the British and just as firm in his hatred of the Americans (here, too, just slightly less ardent than Tecumseh).³² Also like Tecumseh, Metoss was capable of forgiveness and mercy, a point Richardson illustrated with an anecdote that involved Metoss giving up the American soldier who had killed his son to the British. Moreover, his son's death left the chief 'frantic with grief,' a state that left the normally sanguine warrior weeping 'like a child' at the funeral and for many days after.³³

Other Indians were not so noble and were far more savage. Indigenous men's bodies figure quite prominently in the text in a number of other ways. There were those 'cowardly and treacherous' – not to mention 'degenerate,' as they refrained from engaging in honourable battle – Chippewas, whose massacring and looting of American soldiers was ended by Tecumseh. Moreover, two days after the Battle of the Miami Richardson chanced upon a scene in the 'Indian encampment' that was a 'spectacle ... of the most ludicrous and revolting nature.' The possessions of the American General Clay were being plundered and those involved were 'busily occupied in displaying their riches, carefully examining each article, and attempting to divine its use.' Here was a scene of colonial hybridity that, for Richardson, illustrated the most troubling and carnivalesque aspects of racial mimicry. Indians wearing dead officers' uniforms and footwear, 'dragging with difficulty the heavy military boots with which their legs were for the first time covered.' They 'strutted forth much to the admiration of their less fortunate comrades.' Others had simply clothed themselves in items of civilian garb or in 'clean white shirts, contrasting in no ordinary manner with the swarthy skin of their skins; all wore some article of decoration, and their tents were ornamented with saddles, bridles, rifles, daggers, swords, and pistols, many of which were handsomely mounted and of curious workmanship.'³⁴ While all of this might be to some extent laughable, worthy only of white condescension and scorn, the scene also held far more harrowing and dire lessons about 'Indians.'

Such was the ridiculous part of the picture; but mingled with these, and in various directions, were to be seen the scalps of the slain drying in the sun, stained on the fleshy side with vermilion dyes, and dangling in the air, as they hung suspended from the poles to which they were attached; together with hoops of various sizes, on which were stretched portions of human skin taken from various parts of the body, principally the hand and foot, and yet covered with the nails of those parts, while, scattered along the ground, were visible the members from which they had been separated, and serving as nutriment to the wolf-dogs by which the Indians were accompanied.³⁵

If his descriptions of Tecumseh and Metoss relied on eighteenth-century depictions of Indigenous people that were grounded in classical imagery and tropes, the above passage presaged Francis Parkman's romantic, albeit lurid, descriptions of Indian depravity.³⁶ As well, with such scenes

Richardson created foils for warriors such as Tecumseh and Metoss and for white soldiers; mutilating bodies and looting clothing for racial parodies suggested the dire outcomes if honourable codes of manliness, ones that stressed self-restraint and empathy for the vanquished, were not observed.

Richardson was not without his own degree of colonial ambivalence toward Indigenous men and their attitudes towards the warrior's body. As with Tecumseh, some Indigenous men's practices demonstrated bravery and a clear ability to withstand physical pain. Indeed, the behaviour of a Sac chief showed that they were not afraid to court the latter so they might garner honour for their people. At breakfast with the garrison officers at Fort Wayne, a Sac chief 'in order to demonstrate more fully the extent to which [his tribe] carried their disregard of pain or death, drew a sharp knife from its sheath, and, having cut a piece of flesh out of one of his thighs, threw it contemptuously away, exclaiming that "he gave it to the dogs."³⁷

Furthermore, the fate that so repelled and fascinated Anglo-American readers and that also had an audience across the Atlantic – that of the white captive – makes an appearance in Richardson's account.³⁸ In the aftermath of the retreat from Fort Wayne, Richardson and his companions ran into an American soldier who had been taken captive and adopted. With a partly shaved head, 'covered with a handkerchief, rolled in the form of a turban,' and a multi-coloured painted face, 'so complete was the metamorphosis, that but for the whiteness of skin visible through several parts of his dress, it would have been difficult to distinguish him from those by whom he was surrounded.' The anonymous adoptee was eating his evening meal, surrounded by his 'new countrymen, with much appetite and unconcern. He expressed himself as being quite reconciled to his new condition, and spoke with warmth of the kind treatment he had received; nor did he seem to attach much consequence to the assurance given him that every exertion would be made on our return to obtain his liberation.'³⁹ Lest his readers think that Richardson had lost his sense of perspective and distance, he reassured them that upon running into this man at Amherstburg a few weeks later, the latter told him his lack of concern over his rescue stemmed from a preference for 'the idle life' of the Indians, in comparison to his 'active service' in the American army.⁴⁰ To be sure, this quote may well have been verbatim, albeit without the adoptee appreciating the different work rhythms and gendered divisions of labour in Indigenous societies. However, it also played to British and Anglo-Americans' concepts of Indigenous men's lack of work discipline

and, too, helped secure Richardson's place as a reliable observer who, by documenting such aberrations from white norms of masculine behaviour, could maintain the precarious boundaries that separated the 'civilized' from the 'savage.'

Men's bodies in the War of 1812, then, underwent and inflicted pain, mutilations, degradations; they also were capable of overcoming these trials to bear witness to them. As a narrator Richardson is omnipresent in his history, as he frequently uses the first person and makes it clear to his audience that his 'history' is also part autobiography and part memoir. As well as his descriptions of the War's embodied and very intimate effects on male participants, Richardson makes no pretence of being a dispassionate or disinterested observer. As the quotations cited above suggest, he constantly uses the first person, making it clear to his reader that he was personally present at the events, both as participant and observer.

To be sure, his history goes beyond the genres of memoir and autobiography, as it also includes numerous quotes from others with footnotes; in many instances, Richardson reprinted in their entirety letters, proclamations, and dispatches from military officials, both British and American. Yet Richardson hoped that because his history was written by one who had lived through the events it narrated – who, like his audience, was 'even himself a student when summoned by the trumpet of War' – it would 'relieve history of the dryness which is so great a barrier to interest with the student' and would lead to a greater identification with the past.⁴¹

Yet the textbook had been not enough for Richardson: he needed, it seemed, to write about his experiences and use a number of genres in which to do so. Richardson's novel, *The Canadian Brothers*, was first published in 1840 in Montreal and was intended as a sequel to his earlier tale, the 1832 novel *Wacousta*. A narrative of the mid-eighteenth century Western frontier, *The Canadian Brothers* takes place after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the reactions of the Western tribes under Pontiac, the siege of Fort Detroit and the capture of Fort Michilmackinac. *Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers* are linked in a number of ways. First, they testify to the ongoing nature of colonial warfare in North America, as the events of 1763 lead into those of the 1770s which then serve as the necessary backdrop and context that, in turn, help the reader understand the hostilities of 1812. Second – and equally importantly for Richardson – *Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers* are also tied by familial feuds and the theme of horrific revenge. While these are shaped by geopolitics, they also are the

product of personal histories that, in *The Canadian Brothers*, culminate in the vengeance sworn by the family of the American settler Jeremiah Desborough on the British family of Granthams. Although Desborough settled on the Canadian side of the Windsor-Detroit border, he treacherously identifies with America. The feud of the 1760s, as well as his own despicable character, drives him to attempt the murder of the Grantham sons, both of whom are descended from members of the British military and serve in the army and navy during the War.

As well as the interlinked military, political, and personal relationships that underpin the novel's plot, Richardson's historical treatment also has much to say about gender relations and his conception of their role in the War. British and American officers recognize each other's manliness and mutually shared conceptions of honour, so much so that removed from the battlefield they enjoy bonds of brotherhood, debating their respective nation's position and stance cordially and without vitriol.⁴² Richardson's depiction of these relationships is not far removed from Alan Taylor's description of American federalist officers' appreciation for the traits of disciplined and honourable military manliness, not to mention the class status, they believed figures such as Brock personified.⁴³ Similar traits can be found in Richardson's portrait of Tecumseh, a striking, handsome, and intelligent military leader. As in Richardson's history, it is the American 'common soldiers,' primarily from the backwoods of Ohio and Kentucky, who, with their vulgar, brutish, and surly conduct, decked out in clothing and weapons more suited for frontier hunting parties, and displaying no respect for codes of honour, are the true enemy.⁴⁴ Overall, then, relationships between men, both bonds and conflicts, take a number of forms in this novel and mirror those discussed in the *History*.

Unlike *Richardson's War*, which had little or nothing to say about women's roles in and relationship to the War, Richardson's novel does, however, present readers with a number of female characters. For one, a woman is the villainess of Richardson's piece, the supposed niece of an American Major – himself one of those well-respected enemies – who in reality is the daughter of the lowly, scheming, cowardly, and traitorous Desborough. She attempts to manipulate an honourable, if somewhat vulnerable, Gerald Grantham and to make him the instrument of her own personal vendetta so that she might avenge her honour, insulted by an American officer. Yet while Matilda Montgomery is eventually exposed as treacherous and dangerous (not to mention being doomed, as she commits suicide), her initial courage and determination in the face of capture by the British is also recognized by their officers.

Upon her arrival at the British garrison in Windsor, accompanying her uncle who has been taken prisoner, Matilda Montgomery's bravery is described to the other British officers by no less a leader than Isaac Brock:

One would scarcely have supposed that a female could have had courage to brave the dangers attendant on an expedition of this kind, in an open boat-but Miss Montgomery, I confess, appears to me to be one whom no danger could daunt, and whose resoluteness of purpose, once directed, no secondary agency could divert from its original aim.⁴⁵

Unlike other depictions of women in the War of 1812, Matilda Montgomery is no helpless victim.⁴⁶

Women – at least upper-class white women – also play a role in the novel's creation of the War's memory. Although Matilda Montgomery is a divisive force between honourable gentlemen, not least because of her lowly and tainted origins, at times other women bring them together. Officers' wives and, especially, daughters help create a world of sociability in which political distinctions are perhaps not so much forgotten as they are laid aside. Just before the War's outbreak, for example, a series of balls given by garrisons on both sides of the border are attended by 'the ladies,' American and Canadian: the balls are social spaces in which women's presence helps create relationships of amicability and good friendship that supersede national hostilities.⁴⁷ Even after the War has begun, the 'amiable daughters of General Hull' so charm the British officers that they contemplate proposals of marriage once the War has ended.⁴⁸ If men's bodies in Richardson's *History* serve as markers of national boundaries, *The Canadian Brothers* hints that women's bodies might be a way to cross those borders – perhaps even transcend them. The anti-American sentiments that Richardson expressed so clearly in his *History* were downplayed in this aspect of his fiction.

Thus, while Richardson's novel revisited the scenes of his textbook, the genre allowed him to explore the realms of the family, of domestic and sexual intimacy in ways that the text, with its focus on battlefields, encampments, and prisons, could not do. While the latter form part of the novel's landscape, the entanglements of the Desborough and Grantham families are the sites in which the War was directly experienced and where it took on its deepest, most closely felt meanings. Perhaps not so much a 'family romance' as a revenge

tragedy, one in which few of its central characters were left to survive the events of 1812–1814, *The Canadian Brothers* placed the war in an affective and emotional framework and thus took the subjective and personal dimensions of *Richardson's War* to an even greater height. Yet despite his desire to explore the war's intensely personal impact, overall Richardson saw the conflict as an affair that most deeply affected men and involved codes of masculine behaviour, one in which women could only play supporting roles.

It is not farfetched to assume that Richardson's own deep emotional investment in the War shaped his approach. He might not have been able to move beyond the physical and psychological wounds inflicted on him by 1812, to recognize the ways in which the War swept up not just men and male children but also women and girls and to appreciate the deeply domestic nature of warfare in Upper Canada, one manifested in the burning of homes and looting of farm household's crops and livestock.⁴⁹ It also might be that the cult of military heroes – and not heroines – that emerged during the Napoleonic Wars and flourished in Britain and, on a smaller scale, in Upper Canada shaped Richardson's choices. Placing women closer to the centre of wartime commemoration, acknowledging more clearly their losses and suffering, may have required greater imagination and empathy than he could summon.

Richardson's own ending was not a happy one: it might have come from the pages of a nineteenth-century didactic novel, featuring as it did a long slide into poverty, obscurity, and lonely death. However, he probably would have been heartened to know that he too would become the subject of both history and historiography. At the dawn of the twentieth century Ontario writer and teacher Alexander Casselman felt that Richardson's work on the War of 1812 had provided an important narrative from an Upper Canadian and British perspective.⁵⁰ To understand Richardson, though, it was necessary to try to rescue the author's own history, since 'all existing biographies were meagre, fragmentary or wrong in many important details.'⁵¹ In his reissued edition of *Richardson's War of 1812* in 1902 (which remains the most accessible version), Casselman noted the intense labour that had gone into his reconstruction of the former's life: 'Several of his relatives had been personally interviewed, other relatives have been communicated with.'⁵² The result was a genealogy of the Richardson and Askin families and the use of previously unpublished letters from Colonels John Askin and Elijah Brush, as well as from Richardson himself. The latter, Casselman was proud to announce, 'throw absolutely new sidelights on that period of our history.'⁵³ Equally importantly, Casselman had

checked the British and American dispatches that Richardson had used in his original edition and had found a number of them to be either 'incorrect or abbreviated.' In the interests of historical accuracy but without wishing, it seems, to draw undue attention to Richardson's deficiencies as a historian, Casselman had 'in each instance substituted without comment the full official account.'⁵⁴

Such editing might well, of course, be the product of a concern with professional standards that by Casselman's time had begun to characterize the writing of history in Canada; such a concern placed great stock in the veracity and accuracy of documentary sources.⁵⁵ Yet Casselman also believed in the power of early influences, perhaps even more so than Richardson. While Richardson was quite explicit about the manner in which his personal history was embedded in his account of the War, Casselman reached further back into Richardson's family history as a means of locating and explaining his historical interests. Although young John's early academic achievements, expressed in his prowess in Latin, French, and mathematics, were curtailed by the War's outbreak, his home life provided a 'stimulating' environment for him and his siblings. His father, the military physician and Court Judge for the Western District of the colony, combined 'the strictness of the soldier, the kindness of the physician and the sternness of the judge,' qualities which won him the 'love and respect' of both his family and the local community. However, it was Richardson's mother, Madelaine Askin, who helped shape his approach to the writing of history, thought Casselman. Educated at the convent school of the Congregation de Notre Dame in Montreal, 'the foremost institution for young ladies in Canada,' Madelaine taught her children to speak and write French at a very young age. Her maternal influence resulted in a broader mind, a 'quickened' observation, and a 'nice perception cultivated.' 'His quick eye for natural beauty, his power in vivid description and his marvellous ability in handling the sentence, are an inheritance or an acquisition from his vivacious mother.'⁵⁶

There is more than a little desire for 'race fusion' in Casselman's account of the Askin-Richardson family dynamics, a desire that would reach even greater heights in events such as the 1908 commemoration of Champlain in Montreal (albeit a 'fusion' in which Madelaine Askin's mixed-race background was, perhaps conveniently, forgotten).⁵⁷ Yet the Askin family influence was felt in other ways. When the family moved to Hog Island (now Belle Isle) on the Detroit River, young John was exposed to his mother's 'thrilling stories of romance, of Detroit, of Michilimackinac,' stories which 'enchanted his young imagination.'

He was particularly impressed by his mother's tales of the 'crafty and well-conceived plans of Pontiac, the great chief of the Ottawas,' and his plans to capture Detroit, not least because Madelaine Askin had lived in the fort at the time. 'The layers of time had not bedimmed one of the startling experiences of those eighteen months,' Casselman claimed, and 'proofs of the power of this accomplished lady as a story teller still exist.' The result was that her 'youthful listener even at that early age was enkindled with a desire, not to be realized until he had passed through thirty years of vicissitudes in two continents, when in 1832 he gave to the world his masterly "Wacousta."⁵⁸

His family was not, however, the only influence on young John. As much as the Askin-Richardson family and home are the subject of memory and history, so too is the local community in which John Richardson grew up. It offered him a 'novel and diversified life ... no other place on the continent could boast of a floating population so varied in character and race, so rich in well-defined types of civilized and barbarous human nature.' For one, Amherstburg offered the sight of the 'officers and soldiers of the garrison, dressed in brilliant uniforms, moving about with apparently few duties to perform, attracting the boyish fancy and exciting his admiration and his envy.'⁵⁹ Equally exciting and 'next to the soldiers in attractiveness were the Indians' who came on a regular basis for their 'customary presents' from the Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Richardson watched them arrive on the shores of Detroit River, their 'large fleets of canoes in military array,' saw them marching to the local stores 'with a pride and haughty mien,' or observed their 'various games of leaping, wrestling, ball-playing,' at which time he 'would follow and delight in receiving recognition from some chieftain' whom he had met. Richardson was a regular visitor to their camp on the island, where he 'acquired that close and accurate knowledge of Indian character and life that he afterwards so successfully used' in *Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers*. Finally, the young Richardson also was exposed to the 'French-Canadian and half-breed voyageur ... just returned from trafficking with the Indians at their homes in the wilds of the interior, and in dress or complexion scarcely distinguishable from the Indians themselves.' His childhood home, then, gave him the material he drew upon for his histories, poetry, and novels. 'The scenes of his boyhood are the favorite setting for his characters,' thought Casselman, 'and never after his boyhood had he the opportunity for a lengthened stay in those beloved haunts.'⁶⁰

While notions of honour and loyalty to the British Empire helped shape Richardson's writing about the War of 1812, the brutality of its

events was never far away from his portraits of the conflict. The War might well have provided Upper Canadian youth with stirring examples of patriotic conduct: simultaneously, though, it was a force that degraded and tore apart men's bodies. No matter how much Richardson wished to insist on the War's more uplifting and finer aspects, his memory of it also included the misery, pain, and death that it brought to those who fought in it. Although the tribulations suffered by Richardson's fictional characters were not entirely the result of imperial clashes, as they emanated from local hatreds and rivalries created and festering long before 1812, nevertheless the War served as a kind of crucible in which these hatreds might, tragically, erupt. In Richardson's accounts of 1812, then, memory and history, the body, the family, and the battlefield, mingled in ways that disrupted – even if they did not dislodge – more triumphalist narratives of the War's meaning for Upper Canadians.

Notes

- 1 John Richardson, *Richardson's War of 1812: With Notes and a Life of the Author*, Introduction by Alexander Clark Casselman (1840; Toronto: Historical Publishing Co., 1902), 1
- 2 David R. Beasley, 'John Richardson,' in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, <http://www.biographi.ca>.
- 3 Richardson, *Richardson's War*, 3.
- 4 John Richardson, *Wacousta or, The Prophecy; a Tale of the Canadas*, Edited by Douglas Cronk (1832; Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990); John Richardson, *Eight Years in Canada* (1847; New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967).
- 5 Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario 1790–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 35–41.
- 6 George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 177–79, 242–3, 250–1; Cecilia Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women: the Gendered Languages of Politics and Religion in Upper Canada, 1791–1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 37–8.
- 7 Guy St. Denis, *Tecumseh's Bones* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 10–13.
- 8 The different positions of federalists and republicans vis-à-vis the War are discussed by Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010). See also Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
- 9 Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada: A Short history of English-Canadian Literature* (2nd ed.: Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1961). 31. But see Micheline Cameron and Carole Gerson, 'Authors and Literary Culture,' in *History of the Book in Canada: Volume Two 1840–1918*, eds. Yvan Lamonde, Patricia Lockhart Fleming and Fiona A. Black (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Cameron and Gerson point out that Richardson shared other British North American authors' aspiration to see their work circulate among both British and American audiences (126–7).
- 10 David Thompson, *A History of the Late War between Great Britain and the United States of America* (1832; Toronto: G. F. Payne, 1845). Thompson's career is discussed in R. D. Gidney, 'David Thompson,' *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, <http://www.biographi.ca>.
- 11 Colin White, "'His dirge our groans, his monument our praise": Official and

- Popular Commemoration of Nelson, 1805–1806,’ in *History, Commemoration, and National Pre-occupation: Trafalgar 1805–2005*, ed. Holger Hoock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23–48; Holger Hoock, ‘Pomp and Circumstance in London,’ in *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World* (London: Profile Books, 2010).
- 12 Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commemorations of the War in Upper Canada are discussed in Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: the Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 13 For explorations of these relationships in the early nineteenth-century transatlantic world, see Stefan Dudink and Karen Hagemann, ‘Masculinity in politics and war in the age of democratic revolutions, 1750–1850,’ in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, eds. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). See also Karen Hagemann, Gisela Mettele, and Jane Rendall, eds., *Gender, War and Politics: Transatlantic Perspectives, 1775–1830* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), especially the essays in Part II, ‘Masculinity, Revolution, and War.’ For an exploration of the impact of World War One on British men’s bodies, see Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 14 Richardson, *Richardson’s War*, 116.
- 15 Keith Walden, ‘Isaac Brock: Man and Myth: A Study of the Militia Myth of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada, 1812–1912’ (MA thesis, Queen’s University, 1971).
- 16 Richardson, *Richardson’s War*, 110.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 138–9.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 139–40.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 140.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 247.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 258. Their requests for some relief being rebuffed ‘in the most positive and ‘unfeeling terms,’ the prisoners then devised a scheme to take their handcuffs off while appearing to still be chained (258).
- 27 *Ibid.*, 261–3.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 264. Richardson admitted that others were convinced of ‘the injustice of such a charge.’
- 29 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 154–5.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 207. Early nineteenth-century American admiration for Indigenous rhetoric, especially that of Tecumseh, is discussed in Steven Conn, *History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 82–93.
- 32 Richardson, *Richardson’s War*, 155–6.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 157–8.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 158–9.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 36 For Parkman, see Conn, *History’s Shadow*, 202–09. I have no evidence that Richardson knew or was in contact with Parkman, whose work began to appear after Richardson’s history.
- 37 Richardson, *Richardson’s War*, 102–3. Although Richardson did not mention it, this mortification of flesh might also have been meant as a veiled warning to the British should the latter consider breaking their alliance.
- 38 Captivity stories told by Americans are discussed in Eustace, *1812*, esp. chap. 4, ‘Demographic Strategies and the Defeat of Tecumseh.’
- 39 Richardson, *Richardson’s War*, 101–2.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 102.
- 41 Richardson, *Richardson’s War*, 2–3.
- 42 John Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers or The Prophecy Fulfilled. A Tale of the Late American War*, ed. Donald Stephens (1840; Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992), chap. 6.
- 43 Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 175–86.
- 44 Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, 362–3.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 167.
- 46 Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women*, 40–45.
- 47 Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, 61–2.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 168–73.
- 49 Shepherd, *Profits, Plunder, and Paroles*; Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women*, 45–8.

- 50 For discussions of the War's commemoration, see Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists*.
- 51 Alexander Casselman, 'Prefatory Note,' *Richardson's History*, v.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid., vi.
- 55 Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
- 56 Ibid., xiii.
- 57 H. V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Madelaine Askin's mixed-race background is discussed in Beasley, 'John Richardson' and David R. Farrell, 'John Askin,' *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, <http://www.biographi.ca>.
- 58 Casselman, 'Biography of Richardson,' in *Richardson's History*, xiv.
- 59 Ibid., xiv.
- 60 Ibid., xv. Although it would warrant further research, Casselman's depiction of a heterogenous locale, one in which racial 'others' were confronted on a daily basis – sometimes in coexistence, sometimes in conflict – seems to foreshadow some of the arguments made in Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

* **Cecilia Morgan** is a professor in the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education at the University of Toronto. She has written extensively about the links between gender, culture and imperial identities in Canada and about the history of commemoration and identity in Canada, including a book on *Creating Colonial Pasts: History, Memory and Commemoration in Southern Ontario, 1860–1980*.