

Two Songs from the War of 1812

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Come All You Bold Canadians

“Very little is known about the War of 1812, because the Americans lost it.” This line comes from humorist Eric Nicol’s tongue-in-cheek history of Canada, *100 Years of What?* (1966). Historians may differ (although, in my opinion, a draw between Britain’s small North American colonies and a neighbouring country ten times their size was at the very least a moral victory).

Early in the war, British troops from St. Joseph’s Island, near Sault Ste. Marie, made a surprise attack on the American fort at Michilimackinac, at the north end of Lake Michigan, and captured it in a bloodless victory. All of the Great Lakes above the U.S. fort at Detroit were now controlled by Britain and its First Nations allies, who had set aside historic enmities to join in opposing American expansion.

The British General Brock decided on a bold attempt to capture Detroit. He marched a force of volunteers from York (now Toronto) to Port Dover, and thence transported them by boat along the north shore of Lake Erie to Fort Malden (now Amherstburg), took cannon from that fort to Sandwich (now Windsor), and began firing on Detroit across the river, scoring some hits and inflicting a few casualties. The American cannon had a shorter range, and were unable to retaliate. The American General Hull believed that his position was untenable, and surrendered, likely a sensible military decision,

although the fact that he was prostrated with fear and almost incapable of acting at the time was later used against him in his court-martial. He was convicted of cowardice and sentenced to death, was pardoned by the President, and died an embittered old man. General Brock, on the other hand, later died gloriously in the Battle of Queenston Heights, which his surviving subordinates went on to win, and became a Canadian hero.

A document in the possession of the Niagara Historical Society attributes authorship of the song to one Private Flumerfelt of the York Volunteers. I learned it from the singing of Alan Mills on the old *Canada’s Story in Song* LP set on Folkways (now available on CD from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, www.folkways.si.edu); I suspect (though I can’t find documentation) that Mills added the tune. The song was printed in Edith Fowke’s and Alan Mills’s book, also entitled *Canada’s Story in Song* (Toronto: W.J. Gage Ltd., undated), and the later version, *Singing Our History: Canada’s Story in Song* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1984).

Mills sang the song in lively fashion, with guitar accompaniment; I have “traditionalized” it, singing it a cappella, with slightly variable rhythm and the usual small changes in the lyrics due to memory lapses, etc. The lyrics here are taken from the published version.

Come all you bold Canadians, I’d have you lend an ear,
Concerning a fine ditty that would make your courage cheer,
Concerning an engagement that we had at Sandwich town,
The courage of those Yankee boys so lately we pulled down.

There was a bold commander, brave General Brock by name,
Took shipping at Niagara and down to York he came,
He says, “My gallant heroes, if you’ll come along with me,
We’ll fight those proud Yankees in the west of Canaday!”

‘Twas then that we replied, “Along with you we’ll go,
Our knapsacks we will shoulder without any more ado,
Our knapsacks we will shoulder and forward we will steer,
We’ll fight those proud Yankees without either dread or fear.”

We travelled all that night and part of the next day
With a determination to show them British play,
We travelled all that night and a part of the next day,
With a determination to conquer or to die.

Our commander sent a flag to them and unto them did say,
“Deliver up your garrison or we’ll fire on you this day!”
But they would not surrender, and chose to stand their ground,
We opened up our great guns and gave them fire a round.

Their commander sent a flag to us, for quarter he did call,
“Oh, hold your guns, brave British boys, for fear you slay us all.
Our town you have at your command, our garrison likewise.”
They brought their guns and grounded them right down before our eyes.

And now we are all home again, each man is safe and sound,
May the memory of this conquest all through the Province sound!
Success unto our volunteers who did their rights maintain,
And to our bold commander, brave General Brock by name!

Come All You Bold Canadians

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody is accompanied by guitar chords indicated above the staff. The lyrics are written below the notes. The score consists of six lines of music. The first line starts with a whole rest followed by a quarter rest, then the melody begins. The lyrics are: 'Come all you bold Ca - na - di - ans, I'd'. The second line continues: 'have you lend an ear, Con - cern - ing a fine'. The third line: 'dit - ty that would make your cou - rage cheer, Con -'. The fourth line: 'cern - ing an en - gage - ment that we had at Sand - wich'. The fifth line: 'town, The cou - age of those Yan - kee boys so'. The sixth line: 'late - ly we pulled down.' The chords used are G, C, G, D, Amin, D, G, D, Amin, G, C, D, G, D7, and G.

James Bird

The Americans realized that they had to establish a naval presence on Lake Erie if they wanted to regain Detroit. A year after the events related in “Come All

You Bold Canadians”, Commodore Perry built a fleet at Presque Isle Bay, near Erie, Pennsylvania. He was desperately undermanned. Among the few volunteers

to reach him was a group commanded by James Bird, who was something of a hard case. When his unit was given the job of guarding a warehouse, they stole the stores instead, with Bird's connivance. Bird resisted arrest, was court-martialed and was sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted if he would serve as a marine on board Perry's fleet.

On September 10, 1813, Perry defeated the British in the Battle of Lake Erie. Bird distinguished himself in the battle, was wounded, and afterward was fêted as a hero. However, he returned to his old ways, did not take to mundane guard duties, and deserted, but was captured in a tavern. At his second court-martial he was again sentenced to death. Efforts were made to have the President commute the sentence because of Bird's heroism in the battle, but the President refused because of the need for examples to combat the rise of desertions. Bird was executed in October 1814. The Americans recaptured Detroit, invaded what is now southwestern Ontario, won a battle at Moraviantown, but were overextended and could not hold their gains.

A poem about James Bird by Charles Miner was printed in a newspaper in 1814, and passed into oral tradition as a song. Edith Fowke describes it as "one of the most widely known of the native American ballads". It rather sentimentalizes the events and whitewashes Bird's character, although it otherwise

recounts the story accurately enough. (One minor factual difference: Bird was court-martialed aboard the *Niagara*; the ship he sailed on was the *Lawrence*.)

A version sung by O.J. Abbott is included on *Songs of the Great Lakes* (Folkways FE 4018, now available on CD from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, www.folkways.si.edu); he retains fifteen of the original twenty-two verses, adds another couplet and combines the couplets into four-line verses. Edith Fowke's liner notes quote extensively from Dobbins, *History of the Battle of Lake Erie and Reminiscences of the Flagships Lawrence and Niagara* (Erie: Ashley Printing Co., 1876).

The lyrics below are taken from the LP liner notes. In the version I perform, I have squashed the final four verses to three, removing some of the more mawkish sentimentality. (I also change "ne'er" to "e'er" in verse 4, on the assumption that the expression was misunderstood by the singer, so that he was saying just the opposite of what he meant.)

Interestingly enough, the song is not mentioned in the recent book on O.J. Abbott (Vikar & Panagapka, *Songs of the North Woods, as sung by O.J. Abbott and Collected by Edith Fowke*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004, reviewed in *CFM*, 39.2, p. 18), which extensively lists Abbott's collected repertoire.

You sons of freedom listen to me, and you daughters too give ear;
You a sad and mournful story as was ever told shall hear;
Hull you know his troops surrendered and defenceless left the West;
Our forces quick assembled, the invader to resist.

There was one amongst the number, tall, graceful and serene,
Firm his step, his look undaunted, ne'er a nobler youth was seen;
One fond kiss he snatched from Mary, craved his mother's prayer once more,
Pressed his father's hand and left them for Lake Erie's distant shore.

Soon he came where noble Perry had assembled all his fleet;
Here this noble Bird enlisted, expecting soon the foe to meet;
Where is Bird when battle rages? Is he in the strife or no?
Hark! The cannon's roar tremendous, here we meet our furious foe.

But behold! a ball has struck him; see the crimson current flow;
"Leave the deck!" exclaimed brave Perry; "No," cried Bird, "I will not go;
Here on deck I took my station; Bird will ne'er his colours fly;
I will stand by you, brave Perry, till we conquer or we die."

And did Bird receive a pension, or was he to his friends restored?
No, nor ever to his bosom clasped the maid his heart adored;
But there came most dismal tidings from Lake Erie's distant shore;
Better there that brave Bird had perished after the battle's awful roar.

"Dearest father, tell my mother when this letter reaches you,
Not to mourn; her first beloved oh dearly bids his last adieu;
I'm a sufferer for deserting from the brig *Niagaree*;
Dearest mother, read this letter, 'tis the last you'll hear from me."

Dark and dismal was the morning Bird was ordered out to die;
 Where's the heart that would not pity or for him would heave a sigh?
 See him kneel upon his coffin; sure, his death can do no good;
 Spare him! Hark! Oh God, they've shot him, see his bosom stream with blood.

Farewell, Bird, farewell forever; home nor friends you'll see no more;
 Now his mangled corpse lies buried on Lake Erie's distant shore;
 Bird will ever be remembered, aye, unto this present day;
 Oh, what can beset or wrong them who engage in war or fray?

James Bird

You sons of free - dom, list - en to me,
 and your daugh - ters too give ear; You a sad and
 mourn - ful a stor - y as was e - ver told shall hear.
 Hull you know his troops sur - ren - dered and de - fence - less
 left the west, our for - ces quick as - sem - bled,
 the in - va - der to re - sist.