

The War of 1812, Brock and Queenston Heights

In Which our Intrepid Author Solves a 52-year-Old Mystery

Lorne Brown

2012 is the bicentennial of the War of 1812 and the usual hoopla is in full swing. Or it is in Ontario, that is. The War of 1812 hardly touched Atlantic Canada, Québec is largely indifferent to this conflict, and it is not part of western Canada's history. And it almost seems as if no one in America is even aware of the War of 1812, never mind its bicentennial.

Many consider the War of 1812 a misnomer, claiming it was really nothing more than a series of skirmishes. They may be right, but far too many people on both sides died gruesome deaths, far too many were grievously wounded, and far too many families were seriously affected for me to make light of this event.

It was a war hardly anyone wanted. Ironically, the Canadian side was defended by, besides the United Empire Loyalists and the British regulars, Americans who had come here for the cheap land, and escaped slaves from the Underground Railroad. The American side in turn made good use of British regulars who defected; no wonder some call it the Civil War of 1812.

When it was all over, the status quo was maintained. All that suffering for naught.



Fig. 1: Death of Tecumseh.

America “lost” because they did not gain Upper Canada as one of their possessions. The Canadians

“won”, or rather, “did not lose” because the original boundaries were kept. The ones who really lost (not in quotation marks) were the natives; under the inspired leadership of Tecumseh they had dreams of an Indian Confederation and their own land. Those dreams died when Tecumseh was killed in the Battle of the Thames in 1813.

For people like me who want to find songs about the War of 1812 to sing, a good starting point is *Canada's Story in Song*, by Edith Fowke and Alan Mills. Helmut Bloom provided the piano accompaniments. Originally published in 1960 by Gage, it was reprinted in 1965 to include chords by Bram Morrison. It was reprinted by Doubleday in 1984 under a new title: *Singing Our History*.

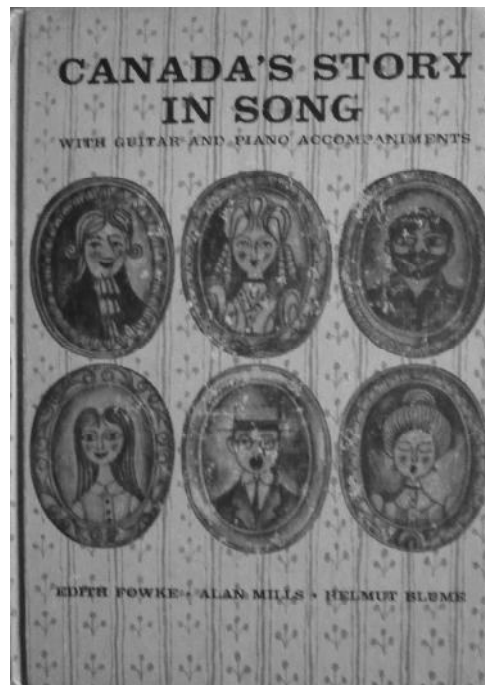


Fig. 2: Canada's Story in Song.

Three songs from the War of 1812 are included: “Come All You Bold Canadians” (discussed by John Leeder in a previous issue of this publication [40.1, p.22]); “The Battle of Queenston Heights”; and “The Chesapeake and the Shannon” (30.2, p.18). It is “The Battle of Queenston Heights” I want to discuss here.

Edith Fowke is quite right when she says in her notes to the song, “Next to the capture of Quebec, the

Battle of Queenston Heights is the most dramatic in Canada's history." Although, if ever a battle deserved the title skirmish, this might be it. But because of the death of Brock, this "battle" has truly reached iconic status.

The Queenston heights are located on the Niagara River in the Niagara peninsula. The heights occur where the Niagara Escarpment crosses the Niagara River; in fact, this is where the famous falls originally fell 12,000 years ago. Erosion has worn them away to their current position some 11 kilometers upriver, or south, of Queenston.

Accurate and detailed accounts of this battle are readily available. Suffice to say that, militarily speaking, the high ground is very important. The Americans, still smarting from their defeat by Brock and Tecumseh and the York Militia at Fort Detroit two months earlier – and the subject of the ballad "Come All You Bold Canadians" – were anxious to avenge themselves. One rainy night in mid-October, 1812, they noticed they had a chance to attack and possibly gain the heights. They did, much to the consternation of the British under Brock. From his headquarters in Fort George, about a kilometer north of the heights, Major-General Isaac Brock mounted his faithful horse, Alfred, and galloped south. Passing the militia from York, which was also marching towards the heights, he supposedly issued one of the most famous of Canadian quotations, although I find it hard to believe he actually said such words: "Push on, brave York Volunteers!"

A rarely mentioned story is that Brock actually rode Alfred up the heights, managed to "spike" a cannon, and led Alfred down again before the final assault on the heights by an American patrol. Still early in the morning, but now joined by the York Volunteers, Brock, this time leading Alfred, led the charge up the hill. The 43-year-old 6'2" leader, wearing his scarlet tunic with the gold epaulets, his distinctive hat, and a sash given him by Tecumseh around his waist, made an easily recognizable target. One shot from a sniper, and the war was over for Brock.



Fig. 3: The Death of Brock.

As every schoolchild knows, the Canadians under Major-General Roger Hale Sheaffe finally regained the heights, sending the Americans scrambling back across the Niagara River. Truly a skirmish, especially considering that less than a year later, the Americans captured Fort George and thus all the Niagara Peninsula, including the heights of Queenston! It was at the Battle of Stoney Creek in June of 1813 – an important battle – that the Americans were defeated and left the peninsula. (Although not for good.)

After Fort Detroit, Brock was knighted, but this news never reached him. He never knew that his full title would be Major-General Sir Isaac Brock. The death of Brock is a famous Canadian moment. In our collective imaginations, we can still see his impressive figure, "splendidly heroic but tragically foolish" (Pierre Berton), dashing up the heights of Queenston on a rainy October morning.



Fig 4: Brock's uniform. Note bullet hole under lapel. (Currently on display in the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa)



Fig 5: Monument marking where Brock fell.

Fowke and Mills had a problem. They could not find a traditional song about Brock and Queenston heights. What to do? Somehow or other, they came across a poem describing this famous event, written by an unknown poet. In Fowke’s words: “These verses were probably written some years after Brock’s death, perhaps in 1824 when the ‘monumental rock’ was raised on the heights of Queenston. The author is not known; and the lines were probably not sung at the time they were written, but Alan Mills has set them to a melody in the folk tradition.”

The Battle of Queenston Heights

Upon the heights of Queenston one dark October day
Invading forces were marshalled in battle’s dread
array,
Brave Brock looked up the rugged steep and planned
a bold attack;
“No foreign flag shall float,” said he, “above the Un-
ion Jack.”

His loyal-hearted soldiers were ready every one,
Their foes were thrice their number, but duty must be
done,
They started up the fire-swept hill with loud resound-
ing cheers,
While Brock’s inspiring voice rang out: “Push on,
York Volunteers!”

But soon a fatal bullet pierced through his manly
breast,
His loving friends to help him around the hero
pressed;
“Push on,” he said, “Do not mind me!” – And ere the
set of sun
Canadians held the rugged steep, the victory was
won.

Each true Canadian soldier laments the loss of Brock;
His country told its sorrow in monumental rock;
And if a foe should e’er invade our land in future
years,
His dying words will guide us still: “Push on, brave
Volunteers!”

So who wrote this poem?

The answer is found in the “Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Books, which had its beginnings in a visit by a British librarian, Edgar Osborne, to Toronto Public Library’s Boys and Girls House branch in 1934. Osborne was impressed by the range and quality of children’s services established and flourishing under TPL’s first head of children’s services, Lillian H Smith.

Osborne donated his personal collection of some 2,000 rare and notable children’s books to Toronto

Public Library in 1949 as a research collection in historical children’s literature.

From this beginning the Osborne Collection has grown to over 80,000 rare and notable modern children’s books. The oldest artifacts in the collection are cuneiform tablets dating from 2,000 B.C.E. Today “The Osborne”, as it is often called, is now housed in the Lillian H. Smith branch of the T.P.L. at 239 College Street in Toronto. Storytellers love to visit it.

In the Osborne Collection is a publication called *Raise the Flag, and other Patriotic Canadian Songs and Poems*. It was published in Toronto by the Rose Publishing Company in 1891. It contains, among other pieces an eight-scene play called “The Capture of Detroit in 1812” and no less than two poems on Queenston Heights. It is the one on page 13 (directly opposite “The Maple Leaf For Ever” by Alex Muir) that interests us.

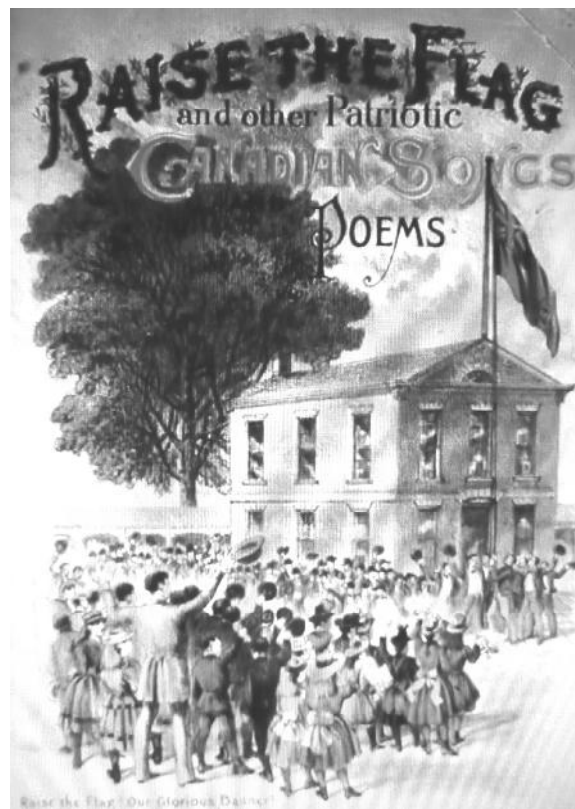


Fig 6: Raise the Flag.

The poem is called “Upon the Heights of Queenston” and it is written by one James L. Hughes. The mystery is solved!

The words are identical to the words in *Canada’s Story in Song*, with the following exceptions: “Canadians held the Queenston Heights” instead of “Canadians held the rugged steep”. And “Each true Cana-

dian patriot” has been changed to “Each true Canadian soldier”.

The Rose Publishing Company, previously Hunter Rose & Co. and Rose-Belford Publishing Co., was the brainchild of George Maclean Rose, 1829-1898. It mainly published textbooks, but could not compete with W.J. Gage & Co.

An unexpected bonus: not only has the author been identified but he is a person I have long been interested in!

James L Hughes 1845-1935

This is an edited version of an article I wrote that was published in School Days, Recollections of Toronto Schools by Learnx Foundation, Toronto 2003.

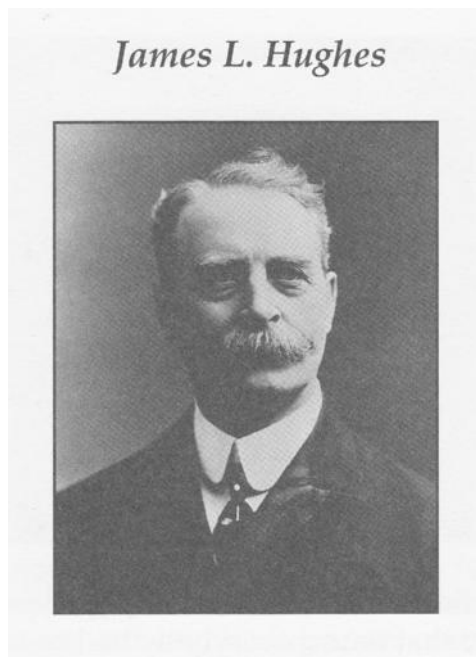


Fig 7: James L. Hughes.

When the history of public education in Ontario is written, two names will stand out: Egerton Ryerson and James L Hughes. Ryerson’s dream was that every child had the right to a free education; Hughes gave a standard of excellence to that education.

Born in 1845, Hughes left the family farm near Bowmanville, Ontario, to enter teaching. After being headmaster of the boys’ division of the Model School, he became, in 1874, Chief Inspector of Toronto schools before he was 30 – a meteoric career rise by any standards. Dr. Hughes would continue in this role for 40 more years until 1914, when, at the age of 70, he retired. (The Chief Inspector would be called the Director of Education in later years.)

He was a progressive and innovative educator, constantly challenging the board and his teachers to adopt new ideas. His reforms made Toronto a leader in provincial education. He played sports such as lacrosse well into his middle age. He was a Methodist, Orangeman, and Mason; he championed the cause of woman suffrage and was president of the Equal Suffrage Association of Canada. He even wrote the only Canadian book on the subject. He sent Christmas cards and poetry to Nellie McClung. Yes, he wrote poetry, albeit not great, and published several slim volumes.

It should also be noted that Hughes’ brother was the infamous Sir Sam Hughes of World War I fame.

His most famous legacy is his establishment of kindergartens in Toronto. In fact, Toronto became the second city in North America (some even say in the world) to have a kindergarten class. Susan Blow had established a successful kindergarten programme in St. Louis, Missouri, which attracted Hughes’ attention. Stating that “play is the work of childhood” (What a progressive idea for the time!), Hughes began including in his annual report to the board mentions of kindergartens. He then started saying that their arrival in Toronto was inevitable, and soon everyone started believing that this would happen. He invited Miss Blow to Toronto to give demonstration classes. And finally, he selected a young woman, Miss Ada Marean, to take training in St. Louis, with her expenses to be shared equally by the Toronto Board and the Department of Education.

The first kindergarten opened in 1883 in the Louisa Street School – site of the present-day Eaton Centre – with Ada Marean as the teacher. Miss Marean soon became Mrs. Hughes and a legend in her own right.

Hughes Public School was named for him. Standing on a hill in Toronto’s west end off Caledonia Avenue, it dominates the area, much like Hughes dominated the Toronto education scene a hundred years earlier. He would not understand why the provincial government of the day did not support public education in the way he had. Budget cuts forced the Toronto Board to close Hughes School in the new millennium. His school now stands empty of school classes, an ironic symbol of the best and the worst of public education in Toronto.

The “Monumental Rock”

I have been visiting Brock’s Monument on Queens-ton heights ever since I was a little boy and my family would enjoy a picnic there *en route* to Niagara Falls. It’s impressive – not as tall as the Peace Tower in Ottawa, but taller than Nelson’s Column in London, after which it was modelled. Designed by To-

ronto's most famous architect of the time, William Thomas – his works include St Michael's Cathedral, the Don Jail and the St Lawrence Hall, among many others – it has a circular stone staircase allowing you to climb 235 steps to the top. I did this many times as a boy, always finding the view through the tiny por-tholes somewhat anti-climactic, but nevertheless proud of my bragging rights. The monument was closed for about five years for major restoration, but is now open again and available to be climbed. I, however, will have to have five years of major resto-ration done on me before I attempt to climb it again!



Fig. 8: Brock's Monument.

The original monument, called "The Brock Monu-ment", was built in 1824 but destroyed by an anti-British agitator in 1840. In 1852 Thomas won the right to build the new monument (and also £25) and it was officially inaugurated on October 13, 1859, 46 years to the day from Brock's death. Brock is buried inside the monument, but his figure still stands guard 56 metres above. Today no one calls it the Brock Monument; it's always Brock's Monument.



Fig. 9: Some of the 235 steps to the top.



Fig. 10: The author's grandchildren.

The Native Contribution

Back in 1812 they were called Indians. Today in Canada they are called First Nations, while in Amer-ica they are called Native Americans. To keep things simple I will use the term natives.

The three songs about the War of 1812 in *Canada's Story in Song* make no reference to the native contri-bution at all. This is not surprising; in many accounts they seem to be left out altogether, or of minor im-portance. On Queenston heights today we can't miss the giant Brock's monument. At the base of the heights is a monument to Alfred, Brock's faithful horse, who also perished in the battle.



Fig. 11: The meeting of Brock and Tecumseh, an important turning point in the war.

Except for a makeshift tribute, we look in vain for a monument to Tecumseh or to any of the native warriors who were so important in this conflict.

To help set the record straight, let me say that at Fort Detroit the American commander, William Hull, was terrified of the natives. Tecumseh marched his Shawnee troops – badly outnumbered by the Americans – along a ridge, where they were easily viewed. He then had them dip below the ridge and circle back out of sight to join the end of the parade on top of the ridge in an endless circle. The effect of a seemingly numberless band of native warriors had a demoralizing effect on Hull; when Brock's cannon shot breached the fort and killed several soldiers, Hull immediately surrendered. Brock was the recognized hero of the battle, but Tecumseh and his men played a huge role. The fact that Tecumseh admired Brock – and *vice versa* – meant that the British forces were augmented by the native forces. This was a huge factor in the eventual outcome of the War of 1812.

At Queenston, 80 warriors from the Grand River joined in on the final attack against the defending Americans. Protected by the forest, they climbed the escarpment, let loose demoralizing whoops that sent some of the Americans in panic across the Niagara River, and waited till Sheaffe's men had surrounded the heights. They were then an important part of the final attack that ended when the Americans surrendered and fled across the river.

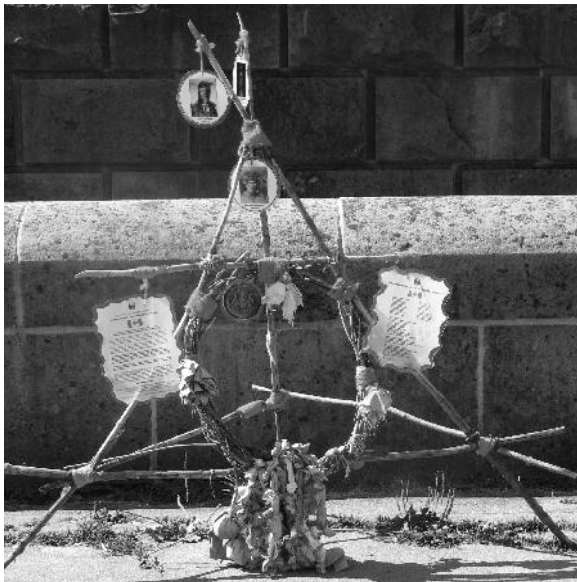


Fig. 12: Six Nations Tribute.

On the north side of Brock's monument there is a makeshift tribute to the contribution by the Six Nations warriors. This year, applications to design a \$1.5 million monument commemorating the sacrifice

of the Six Nations and their native allies during the War of 1812 are flooding in just a few days after a request for proposals went public. It will be built on the highest point of the heights, but will be low to the ground. The new monument will finally recognize the often under-appreciated contribution to the war effort of First Nations peoples.

In 1813 Tecumseh was killed in the Battle of the Thames, a year less a week after Brock's death. A small monument to Tecumseh is located just outside Thamesville, but there are plans now to build a park and an outdoor interpretive centre at the site. Unfortunately for the Friends of the Tecumseh Monument, it is an uphill battle to achieve the \$4.2 million goal.

A Mystery

Where is Tecumseh buried? The simplest answer: Nobody knows. Some say he was buried in the battlefield. Some say he was buried in what is now the east side of London, Ontario. Others say he was buried in the native territory of St. Anne Island in the St. Clair River.

Reality Check

In the many paintings of the death of Brock, and in our collective imaginations, we see the tall, trim, heroic, scarlet-clad Brock dashing up the heights. The reality is quite different. Measurements of his military uniform show that the 6'2" general had a very ample girth of at least 47 inches. His famous gallop on Alfred left both of them completely covered with mud, there being no paved roads in those days. Rain had been falling in the area for some time.

There is an enduring legend that Brock's dying words were, "Push on, brave York Volunteers!" In actual fact, his death was instant. But no sooner had he hit the ground when a cannon ball sliced a fellow soldier in two; the severed and heavily bleeding corpse fell upon Brock. A gruesome spectacle no one would want to paint. No famous last words.

How Many Times was Brock Buried?

He was initially buried in Fort George in an impressive and well-attended ceremony. Even the Americans in Fort Niagara across the river sounded their cannons in respect. When the first monument was built, he was reburied in it. When it was destroyed he was reburied back in Fort George. Finally, and for the fourth time, he was reburied in the new (and present) Brock's monument in 1853.

Popular “Folk” Song

Arguably the most popular “folk” song to come out of the War of 1812 is “The Battle of New Orleans”. It was written by Jimmy Driftwood in 1958; he set it to the tune of “The Eighth of January” and it became hugely popular in a version by Johnny Horton. The Battle of New Orleans did indeed take place and the Americans did indeed rout the British. The only problem: the war had ended two weeks earlier! Again, all for naught.

The Most Famous Song

Without question, the most important and famous song from the War of 1812 is “The Star-Spangled Banner”. The American national anthem was written in 1814 by a 35-year-old lawyer Francis Scott Key. He had witnessed the British naval bombardment of Fort McHenry in Chesapeake Bay and had scribbled his thoughts and feelings on the back of a letter. It officially became the national anthem in 1931, ironically using a British tune, “To Anacreon in Heaven”, for its melody.

Important Dates

Declaration of War by USA - June 18, 1812
Battle of Fort Detroit - August 13 - 16, 1812 *"Come All You Bold Canadians"*
Battle of Queenston Heights and Death of Brock - October 13, 1812 *"The Battle of Queenston Heights"*
First Battle of York - April 27, 1813
Battle of Fort George - May 27, 1813
Captain Broke challenges Captain Lawrence to sea battle in Boston Harbour - June 1, 1813 *"The 'Chesapeake' and the 'Shanon'"*
Battle of Stony Creek - June 5-6, 1813
Second Invasion of York - July 31, 1813
Battle of Lake Erie - September 10, 1813
Battle of the Thames and Death of Tecumseh - October 5 - 1813
Battle of Lundy's Lane - July 25, 1814
Burning of Washington - August 24, 1814
Treaty of Ghent - December 24, 1814
Battle of New Orleans - January 8, 1815 *"Battle of New Orleans"*
Ghent Treaty ratified by US Senate - February 16, 1815

And so I end my bicentennial tribute to the War of 1812. I find it hard to glorify war, but I find it quite inspiring to celebrate 200 years of peace. And I think it is a storyteller's duty to keep alive songs and stories such as these.

Lorne Brown is a Toronto storyteller and ballad singer, and a former editor of this publication. The pictures are from the author's collection.