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“It is Impossible for His Majesty’s Government to Withdraw from these Dominions” Britain and the Defence of Canada, 1813 to 1834

Terry McDonald

The War of 1812 showed the British government how vulnerable Canada was to an attack by the United States, particularly in the Great Lakes region. In order to defend its North American possessions, the government in London continued to maintain a naval dockyard at Kingston that for most of its existence, was under the command of Captain (later Commodore) Robert Barrie. As the American threat diminished, Barrie and his officers were able to enjoy a somewhat hedonistic lifestyle, probably unaware that serious questions were being asked in London about the viability of and even the necessity for such a station. Using the Duke of Wellington’s thoughts and comments about the defence of Canada and contemporary accounts of life in Kingston, this essay examines the political and economic realities facing the government and contrasts them with everyday life in one of Imperial Britain’s more important garrison towns.

La Guerre de 1812 a montré au gouvernement britannique à quel point le Canada était vulnérable à une attaque des États-Unis, spécialement dans la région des Grands Lacs. Pour défendre ses biens nord-américains, le gouvernement de Londres continua à maintenir un port militaire à Kingston qui fut, pendant la plus grande partie de son existence, commandé par le capitaine (puis commodore) Robert Barrie. Lorsque la menace américaine diminua, le capitaine Barrie et ses officiers adoptèrent un mode de vie quelque peu hédoniste, sans savoir que de sérieuses questions étaient posées à Londres concernant la viabilité et même la nécessité de ce poste. À l’aide des pensées et commentaires du Duc de Wellington sur la défense du Canada ainsi que de témoignages contemporains sur la vie à Kingston, le présent article examine les réalités politiques et économiques que le gouvernement devait affronter et les compare avec la vie quotidienne dans une des plus importantes villes de garnison de l’Empire britannique.

This essay examines the delicate relationship that existed between the United States and Great Britain in the years after the War of 1812. That rather curious war¹ was seen in Britain as an unfortunate sideshow to the main event, the continuing struggle with France. It occurred because of the United States' anger at British policies such as the impressment of American seamen and the blockading of French (and French-controlled) ports by the Royal Navy in order to prevent neutral countries trading with France. Its outbreak, in June 1812, was described at the time as something that "added to the confusion and calamity of the times," and there were regrets about the "unfortunate commencement of a war between Great Britain and those Transatlantic States to which she gave birth and has communicated the most valuable of her preserves, her law and liberty." The *Annual Register*, an annual summary of the previous year's events, went on to say that "to this country ... the war has been little more than an addition to its ills, drains and losses, but to the United States its continuance must prove a severe trial of strength" (1813, iv). A year later, this same publication argued that "the war in that quarter can scarcely survive a general peace in Europe, since the original causes of it will be at an end, and the match will become too unequal in point of power to be continued" (1814, v).

The end of the war was also discussed by the *Register*, which commented that "The peace with the United States of America was peculiarly welcome, as it came, somewhat unexpectedly, at the conclusion of a year of more extended and destructive warfare than had hitherto been witnessed in this unhappy quarrel. It had, indeed, become evident that the continuance of hostilities could have no other consequence than the aggravation of reciprocal losses" (1815, v).

This somewhat sparse commentary sums up the British view of the conflict—it was an unfortunate occurrence and Britain had clearly underestimated the strength of the enemy, particularly American maritime strength. As William Cobbett commented, American naval victories had "filled us with shame, and the world with astonishment" (1829, 275). Once the war was over, as C.P. Lucas pointed out in one of the earliest scholarly works on the topic, "They were glad to be quit of it; and they willingly tried to forget it" (1906, 255). There is much truth in this allegation as far as the British public is concerned, for while much has been written on the War of 1812, it has mainly been written by Canadian historians. This is probably not surprising given that, of the three participants, it was Canada that felt it had gained something from the war, and that was a national identity. C.P. Stacey's *Canada and the British Army, 1846-1871*, despite its stated time frame, has a perceptive section on the aftermath of the War of 1812. Recognizing the war's role in the formation of a country called Canada,

he criticized the naïveté of the new nation's "overweening confidence in the military virtue of mere courage and patriotic feeling, and an almost complete lack of appreciation of the value of the trained professional soldier" (1963, 13). Trained, professional soldiers were, of course, a product of the British system. J. Philp, in a 1949 essay in *Ontario History*, discussed the impact that British garrisons had upon the economy and social life of the Canadian communities in which they were based, with an emphasis on what is now western Ontario. He pointed out that some historians were attracted to the topic of the British military presence in Canada by "the problems of Imperial policy on a high level" (1949, 37). My argument addresses the importance of the British military presence in Canada from two perspectives: that of the Duke of Wellington and the naval authorities in London, England, and that of Commodore Robert Barrie and the people of Kingston, Ontario.

Probably the most significant work on Imperial policy is K. Bourne's *The Balance of Power in North America, 1815-1908* (1967). As its time frame suggests, it deals with the evolution of British policies towards the United States and Canada, and concludes that, for Britain, the realization that America had ceased to be "a likely enemy" and was, instead "a useful and necessary friend" was "a long and difficult process" (1967, 408). In the years after the War of 1812, this realization was a long way off. More modern historians have concentrated on the land war,² but several have written about the conflict on the Great Lakes. R. Malcolmson's *Lords of the Lake* (1998) concentrates on Lake Ontario, and the struggles on the larger lakes are analyzed in B. Gough's *Fighting Sail on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay* (2002) and in D.C. Skaggs and G.T. Altoff's *A Signal Victory: the Lake Erie Campaign* (1997). This essay revolves around the actions of two men, both of them British, who fit well into a discussion of the defence of empire in the three decades following the end of the war: the Duke of Wellington, national hero and leading politician, and Captain (later Commodore) Robert Barrie, career sailor and, for 15 years, superintendent of Kingston Dockyard. The decisions and actions of these two men during Barrie's superintendence of the dockyard reveal much about Britain's quandary over the defence of its North American possessions.

Despite the indifference, or collective amnesia, of the British public towards the War of 1812, the defensive problems revealed by the conflict continued to exercise the minds of politicians. The war revealed "the negative appreciation of the damage which each nation could do to the other, yet without being able to strike a mortal blow" (Bartlett, 1963, 73). That "damage" could easily include the American conquest of Canada, and for the next two or three decades Britain remained wary of American intentions. In assessing the defence of Canada and

the empire's future relations with the United States, Britain had to be particularly mindful of the strategic importance of the Great Lakes, especially Ontario and Erie. This was, of course, the region where much of the fighting during the war had taken place.

The war had ended with one significant development: the agreement between the two governments on just how many ships Britain could maintain within continental North America. In 1816, the Americans had suggested that both sides reduce their naval forces on the lakes to a minimum. This caught the British by surprise for, as Bourne notes, there was "an apparent determination on the British side to increase their armaments on the lakes" (1967, 12). Given the need by both sides to economize in the aftermath of the war, however, in 1817 and 1818 Britain and the United States agreed to conventions that became known as the Rush-Bagot Treaty after the American Acting Secretary of State, Richard Rush, and the British Minister to Washington, Sir Charles Bagot. It was agreed that neither side would maintain a navy on these waters, just a few armed vessels to apprehend smugglers or other lawbreakers. Each country would have only two armed vessels on the lakes above Niagara Falls, one on Lake Ontario and one on Lake Champlain³ and each vessel would have only one cannon. Despite this agreement, Britain managed to keep the remnants of a naval force on Lake Ontario, and throughout the 1820s and 1830s its government pondered over what its policies and strategies should be. As Bourne observes, "It was certainly not that the possibility of hostilities against the United States had been utterly rejected. These the Admiralty thought were 'highly improbable' Nevertheless they did 'consider it their duty to provide for such a contingency on the Lakes'" (1967, 25). The heart of Britain's defensive system in Canada was the town of Kingston, where the Royal Navy had established its only freshwater station in 1813. There were also several "satellite" depots at Grand River on Lake Erie, Penetanguishene on Georgian Bay, and Isle aux Noix in the Richelieu River, near Lake Champlain. There was a major storehouse at Montreal and a transshipping storehouse at Lachine. All were under the command of the Kingston Dockyard's superintendent.

The original superintendent, from 1813, was Captain Sir Robert Hall, but after his death in 1818 he was succeeded by a man whose name became synonymous with the dockyard: Robert Barrie. Captain Barrie was in charge of the station and its satellites from 1819 to 1834, and his efforts to keep the fleet he commanded intact and the station open were to occupy him for all of his 15 years in Kingston. He also ensured that he, his family, and his officers enjoyed as full a social life (in the English style) as was possible in the unfamiliar territory of Upper Canada.

His main duty, naturally, was to his ships. In theory, he had 13 vessels under his command at Kingston. Two of these were ships of the line, the *Canada* and the *Wolfe*, but these were only partially built and were never launched. According to R. Malcolmson, each was 172 feet in length and 2,158 tons (1998, 327). There was also a sloop,⁴ the *Star*, and two other ships, the *Niagara* and the *Psyche*, but these three vessels were hauled up ashore. There were six other ships: the *St. Lawrence*, the *Burlington*, the *Kingston*, the *Netley*, the *Charwell*, and the *Montreal*.⁵ The remaining two vessels were the 40-ton yard boat, the *Bull Frog*, and the 70-ton gunboat *Cockburn*. The latter was, in effect, Barrie's personal vessel. In 1826, during a visit to England, he threatened to resign his commission over the state of the dockyard and its obvious inability to resist an American attack. The Admiralty managed to persuade him to return to Kingston by promoting him to Commodore and allowing him to put the *Cockburn* into commission.

The term most commonly used at the time to describe Barrie's fleet was "rotting." The *St. Lawrence* "had lain idle and rotting at its wharf until 1832" (Malcolmson, 1998, 326), and this too was the fate for the other ships and their rigging. Parts of laid-up ships were used to help maintain those still nominally seaworthy. Such was the culture of improvisation within the dockyard that an army officer complained to Barrie about the spars and masts that had been floating in its "mast-pond" for three years. The "obnoxious effluvia" from the spars, he said, was "injurious to the health of the Troops" (Brock 1967, 17). Francis Spilsbury, a 12-year-old local boy serving as a midshipman in Kingston, wrote to his parents on 26 September 1830 and told them that the *Charwell* was "hauled up, being so leaky that she was not safe to lay afloat any longer." Young Francis was so disillusioned with the state of the dockyard that, 18 months later, he again wrote to his parents and said, "my mind is made up to leave the service as there is but very little hopes of me doing any good in it.... I think I had better come home and try some other business."⁶

While Barrie was undoubtedly the master of this small but, it was believed, strategically important area of Upper Canada, he was also subject to a far greater authority at home in England. The Admiralty was, of course, his immediate pay-master and the source of his authority regarding his and the dockyard's role in defending Canada, but there is another, more powerful figure to be considered: Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington. The duke is obviously best remembered as a soldier and the victor of Waterloo, but his political career is equally important. Wellington entered politics at about the same time as Barrie took over at Kingston, and he held a number of senior positions within the British government, including a spell as prime minister between January 1828 and November 1830. As a peer of the realm, the duke had an automatic

place in the nation's legislature and, having decided to involve himself actively in politics, he was appointed to the Cabinet as Master General of the Ordnance in 1818. He had responsibility for Britain's fortifications (and canals) throughout the empire. Wellington was well suited to his new role for, as an American historian perceptively wrote,

his military qualities probably served him best. He could assess a situation and act, if not to win, at least to retreat in orderly fashion; he knew when he was beaten ... this selfless, toughly pragmatic attitude was one of the constant and most valuable factors in English political crises for more than thirty years. (Webb 1980, 171)

Webb's comments apply equally well to both the social-political situation in Britain and the state of the Americas. Despite the ending of the war and the signing of the Rush-Bagot Treaty, Britain was still concerned about the difficulties of defending Canada if ever the Americans were to attack. In one of the earliest letters from his time as Master General of the Ordnance, Wellington wrote to Lord Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies (an interesting juxtaposition) on 1 March 1819 regarding recent dispatches "upon the defence of Canada" from its Governor General, the Duke of Richmond. He revealed an admirable grasp of the nature of Canadian geography and commented in detail on what should happen to Quebec City and Montreal in the event of an American attack. He was confident that, as long as the Richelieu River remained in British hands, the Americans would find it difficult or even impossible to penetrate the area with an army of sufficient strength to attack Quebec. Before discussing Upper Canada and, in particular, Kingston, which he regarded as "the point of greatest importance after Montreal," he wrote,

[communication] by the St Lawrence about St Regis, and by the Lake Ontario, the River Niagara, the Lake Erie, the River Detroit, Lake St Clair, the River St Clair and Lake Huron [is] impractical in time of war. An enemy has only to place a few heavy batteries closed in at almost any points of the rivers in order to command/prevent our use of the navigation. We may likewise prevent his [*sic*] using it. But it is absolutely necessary to us, and is not so to him.

He cautioned that "this observation applies only to the rivers" and went on to reveal his doubts about Britain's ability to match the Americans in naval warfare on the lakes. "Naval superiority," he wrote, "must come from England and then by a difficult river navigation of nearly 300 miles to Kingston ... and nearly 1,200 to Lake Huron, whereas the enemy have ... all they require on the spot."⁷

Wellington went on to discuss various possibilities for defending towns and improving communications during wartime and on each occasion made it clear that he saw the construction of canals as the solution. Then he turned his attention to the Niagara frontier:

It is my opinion that this frontier cannot be defended by Fort George or Fort Erie or even by the possession of Fort Niagara. Both Fort George and Fort Erie fell in the last war without one day's defence and not withstanding that Fort Niagara was in our possession from the winter of 1813, General Brown remained on the left of the River Niagara from July to November 1814 and in possession of Fort Erie.

The Niagara frontier can be maintained and defended only by a superior army, and this superior army can be maintained only by the means which can be conveyed to that distant frontier. It is obvious that we cannot rely upon the enjoyment of the navigation of Lake Ontario.

In my opinion then we ought to look to that of La Grande Rivière which falls into Lake Erie. We ought to endeavour to connect the navigation of that river with that of Holland's River which falls into Lake Simcoe, with that of the River Thames, and with that of the River Chippeway [*sic*], by these good railways if the tributary streams should not allow of doing it by water. By these means we should be able to maintain an army upon the Niagara frontier notwithstanding that the enemy should be in possession of the navigation of Lake Ontario.... I am perfectly aware, however, that it will be difficult if not impossible to reconcile the inhabitants of the country to this system, that they will not believe they are to be defended unless they have visible means of defence on the spot, and that people of that description are not unlikely to connect themselves with the enemy to whose mercy they might think they are abandoned; and to prevent these inconveniences it may be necessary to maintain a fort on the Niagara frontier. If this should be the case, I would, as far as I can judge of the localities, recommend a position on the River Chippeway in preference to either Fort Erie or Fort George.

Wellington then became specific about troop numbers and the amount of time it would take to get them to wherever they were needed. He assumed that there would be around 13,000 men available and that of these, 500 would be garrisoned "on the Niagara and in Pentangashine [*sic*], beside the militia which be destined for each post." He would divide the bulk of the army into two corps

of 5,000 men, the "left of these corps, at the head of the Irish Creek which falls into the Rideaux River" while the right corps

should be posted on the communication between the head of Holland's River which runs into Lake Simcoe and the head of the Grand River which runs into Lake Erie. If required at York it could arrive by the Trent within two or three days; if at Kingston, it could arrive in 6 or 8 days, if on the Niagara frontier, it could arrive by the Grand River and the Chippeway in from 5 to 8 days according to the extent to which the former can be rendered navigable.

This letter has been discussed at length because it reveals the duke's excellent grasp of the logistical problems facing the military in Canada,⁸ and his prescience that canals were the solution to moving large numbers of men quickly and safely; it also formed the basis of later correspondence between Wellington and the military. Despite its brave words, the letter implies that the Niagara region was not as high on the list of priorities as Kingston and Montreal. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the duke and other members of the British military establishment were so well informed about the geography of North America, for their officers and soldiers had 100 years' experience of fighting there. General Gother Mann, for example, who occupied the post of Inspector General of Fortifications between 1811 and 1830, had served in Canada in the late 1780s and could provide first-hand knowledge of the country to politicians and civil servants.

The defence of Canada continued to exercise governmental minds in England in the new decade, and in 1825 the duke established a three-man Committee of Engineers to cross the Atlantic and to "enquire into and report upon" the state of the fortifications and defences in Canada. They were given clear instructions about what they should investigate at all the military bases from Quebec to Lake Huron; they were to repeat the exercise in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. At Niagara, they were to find out the "exact state of the works 'at B' upon the River Niagara at Fort George, Fort Erie etc." They were also "to examine the banks of the River Chippeway and to fix upon a station for a fort upon that river to be constructed with a view to support the operations of His Majesty's troops ... to give confidence to the inhabitants of the country in the efficiency of His Majesty's protection." Wellington cautioned that wherever the proposed fort should be sited, "it should not be too near the extreme frontier of the Niagara."

Within this (long) memorandum, Wellington raises the possibility of improving communications by what he describes as "railroads" although he

does use the term “railway” as well. Given that, in 1825, the concept of the passenger-carrying railway was only just being developed, it would appear that he was referring to its earlier incarnation as a horse- or human-drawn wagon that ran on wooden rails. These had existed in England since the early seventeenth century and were particularly useful in the coal mining industry.¹⁰ Wellington saw them as an alternative to the extant or intended system of communication upon the rivers and canals. As he informed the three officers, “Of course, whenever railroads should be necessary, or should be deemed preferable or less expensive than the improvements of the communication by water, such recommendations must be reported.” He does not mention railways again.

Surprisingly, given the difficulties of communication at this time, the committee appear to have (literally) moved very quickly. Wellington was able to write to Lord Bathurst on 6 December 1825 concerning the committee’s report, which they had both received. The duke was unequivocal in his support for the defence of Canada: “I entreat your lordship,” he wrote, “to observe that it is impossible for His Majesty’s government to withdraw from these dominions. Whether valuable or otherwise, which can scarcely be a question ... they must be defended in war.” The committee were clearly in agreement with the strategy laid down by Wellington in his letter of 1819 and recommended the strengthening of existing fortifications and the building of one or two new ones; it further suggested that communication between Montreal and Upper Canada should be made more practicable through canals and navigations. One of the party, Sir John Smyth, sent Wellington a précis of his thoughts, and on 10 August 1826 the duke replied, saying,

I return your precis which I have read with the greatest satisfaction. It was a knowledge of the events of the late war, and a faint recollection of those of former wars which induced me to propose for the defence of Canada, the system which has been adopted, the wisdom of which this precis proves in the clearest manner.

Thus by the late 1820s a strategy was being developed that saw inland fortifications as the best way of defending Canada. In March 1827, Smyth, on Wellington’s instructions, wrote to the Inspector General of Fortifications, General Gother Mann, telling him that “the sovereignty of His Majesty’s North American provinces will be better preserved by occupying important military points within the country.” In this instance Smyth was discussing the defence of New Brunswick-Maine frontier, but he added that “That this principle was indeed suggested and laid down by His Grace himself for the Niagara frontier, has been since acted upon, by his authority, upon the St Lawrence.”¹¹

There was, however, another dimension to the government's thinking and this, inevitably, was the cost of defending the Canadas and the other provinces. Maintaining fortifications and ships was expensive, and even as the policy of resolute defence was being confirmed, concern was expressed by the British Treasury. At first it was the manpower costs that concerned the Treasury, and the duke had acknowledged this when he wrote in August 1822 to Dalhousie and told him, "You are aware that the government have been for some time occupied in the reduction of all departments of the state, a duty which they have been called upon to perform not less by the voice of Parliament than by their own sense of their duty to the Publick." Wellington went on to point out that while the 4,500 men employed in the defence of the Canadas were costing Britain £42,000 a year in provisions, the 49 who actually ran the operation (the commissariat) cost £11,000, or "33 per cent on the provisions they supply." His solution to this imbalance was to order a reduction by 18 of the numbers in the commissariat. Dalhousie assured the duke of "his readiness to carry out the measures to the utmost point practicable."

Even more costly was the implementation of Wellington's policy of building or strengthening fortifications. On 9 November 1829, Richard Byham, Secretary to the Board of Ordnance, wrote to J.H.K Stewart, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, telling him that the £220,000 allocated for the improvement of fortifications at Kingston (including the building of a sea battery, two redoubts, and three towers) would not be enough and that "a further £53,000 would need to be expended." The Treasury, of course, was not happy with this and when in December it informed the Ordnance Board that it would "not sanction such a large addition to the original estimate for the plan of defence works at Kingston," the board responded by telling it that "in the original estimate it appears that the defence of the dockyard at Kingston was not sufficiently considered." This reply, dated 18 December 1829, included two reports from Wellington's Committee of Engineers. The first stated clearly that "the post of Kingston is the pivot of the defence of Upper Canada," while the second pointed out that although "it would have been desirable to concentrate on the defence works ... this is incompatible with the object since it is only by keeping the enemy away from the docks that the stores can be secured." It added that even if Fort Henry, one of the forts that protected Kingston, was altered, this would "still leave the ordnance and the Commissariat depots on the dock yard exposed."¹²

Even as correspondence regarding the defence of Canada was travelling across the Atlantic, and while the cost of that defence was being discussed in London, the officers and men of the Army and the Royal Navy continued with their duties and their lives. Commodore Barrie and his staff at Kingston, the

centre of Britain's Upper Canadian defence, certainly made the best of the situation. There is a wealth of contemporary information on how Barrie and his officers filled their time, ranging from building a new warehouse, the largest stone building ever built in the area (which still stands as part of the Royal Military College), to hosting lavish social events. Barrie enlarged and improved the "modest frame quarters" that he had inherited from his predecessor, a "purely personal initiative, undertaken in the anticipation of the arrival of his family," which earned him "a rap on the knuckles from the Navy Board." Undeterred, he added an ice house (which earned him another reprimand) and, in 1821, a small wooden schoolhouse. He was reprimanded yet again (Spurr 1977, 73-74). He commented upon his efforts in a series of letters to his mother, telling her in February 1820 that he was "very busy laying in ice for my ice-store. Ice is a necessity here during the summer, and fire and brandy during the winter" (Brock 1975, 3). In 1822, he wrote and told her, "I have some idea of making a small hothouse next year ... [it] would supply us with a variety of vegetables etc." He went on to boast that "I have this year ... brewed my own ale from the hops of this country—as good ale as I ever drank in England" (4). He later grew "excellent pineapples" and claimed to be "the first man in Canada to do so." He claimed that they "graced the tables at Government House at both York and Quebec" (Brock 1968, 16). Barrie also grew peaches and nectarines, as well as asparagus and some salad vegetables.

Barrie became the pivotal figure in Kingston society, hosting dinner parties and balls. As he told his mother in April 1824, "Sometimes a gala day of 24 to dine ... then we shew off and my wine (the best in Canada) suffers severely—those swell days hit me hard in the way of pewter. At the end of the year we continue to live on my salary, a manoeuvre which I dare say astonishes a few of the creditors who are now little by little being repayed" (Brock 1968, 15). The ultimate creditors, though, were in London, where the cost of Kingston and the other outposts of Barrie's "empire" were constantly being monitored.

Barrie was undoubtedly a conscientious officer who tried hard to keep his few ships in the best condition that money and facilities allowed. Indeed, so determined was he to advance the cause of the dockyard that he twice returned to London to lobby for more money and better support. In early 1830 he made the second of his two visits home, clearly aware that the future of the dockyard was under scrutiny in London. That Barrie's views were seen as marginal is perhaps revealed by a letter from Viscount Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, to Wellington dated 10 March. In it the duke was informed that Melville, Sir George Cockburn (Junior Lord of the Admiralty), and Commodore Barrie wished "to see the Duke to discuss the naval establishment on the Canadian Lakes. *A few minutes will suffice.* Barrie is waiting in London."¹³

In 1831, Wellington, no longer prime minister but still heavily involved in politics,¹⁴ wrote to Lieutenant General Sir James Kempt, Master General of the Ordnance and former Governor General of Canada,¹⁵ concerning the Kingston Dockyard. He noted that "the subject is not new to me. Indeed, if I recollect right, I have discussed it more than once with Lord Melville at the Admiralty in the presence of Sir Byam Martin¹⁶ and Captain Barrie." He went on to say that he was "fully aware of the advantages which the United States [had] ... in a war upon the lakes, in the preparation for it and in all circumstances attending it." He could not resist reminding Kempt that as early as 1819 he had supported the building of canals or, as he put it, "a line of inland navigation from Kingston to Penetangushene [*sic*] communicating with each of the lakes by some of the rivers flowing into them from the interior of the country," which would have "enabled us to concentrate our naval means upon any one of the lakes.... Unfortunately, however, that which was proposed in 1819 has not been effected even as yet up to Kingston."

The duke then looked at the broader picture:

In case of war with the United States we must consider what would be the plan of the enemy's operations in Upper Canada. I should say certainly an attack upon the Niagara frontier, particularly now that the Welland Canal has been completed. We could not maintain a body of troops upon the Niagara frontier, or upon Burlington Heights, or even at York, the capital of the province, without having the navigation of the lake and this must be the case till the interior line of navigation will be opened quite to Penetangushene, which work would be attended with that of immense advantages, rendering the military operation for the defence of Upper Canada (and which must from circumstances be purely defensive) nearly independent if the navigation of the lakes. In the existing state of things however, or improved as they will be by the completion of the line of navigation to Kingston, and of the works there, we cannot hope to hold our ground in Upper Canada unless we can navigate the lake.

Wellington at this point still supported Kingston Dockyard as the focus for Britain's defence of Upper Canada, for, as he wrote,

Whatever may be the decision of His Majesty's servants regarding the ships now at Kingston it is quite clear that the yard at Kingston must be maintained, unless it should be determined to give up the province of Upper Canada upon the first blow in any war being struck ... it is better to do some work to the ships there than to allow them to rot and fall to pieces on the stocks or sink at their anchors.

He added a candid rider to his comments:

You'll ask me, do you rely upon all this for giving us naval superiority on the lake in time of war? I answer decidedly not. But it will give us something which will aid our other means, which it must be observed we could not provide at all unless we keep the yard at Kingston. We ought to do in England, or in the seaports of our North American colonies, according to the relative cheapness what the United States are doing in their Atlantic ports. We ought to prepare vessels in framework for service on the Canadian lakes. We shall be able to send them to Kingston from Quebec with as much celerity and, I believe, as cheaply, as the United States can do to Sackett's Harbour.... Whether the government ought to incur this or any expense is again a political question.

As is usually the case, the combined pressures of economics and politics began to prevail and realism set in. Four days after Wellington's comments on the necessity of maintaining the dockyard, but probably not the fleet, he received a letter from Kempt that included copies of the latter's correspondence with Sir James Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty. Kempt referred to a letter from Vice Admiral Byam, the Comptroller of the Navy, to Melville in 1826, which listed the ships on the Canadian lakes and noted their decayed state. On that occasion, Graham had sought Kempt's opinion on the retention of British naval power in Canada, and Kempt had suggested the closure of the dockyard; but he had also pointed out the need for a continuing British presence:

The naval power of the United States and her access to the Canadian lakes precludes British success in naval warfare ... Britain requires a small armed flotilla easily supplied by steamboats and trading vessels from British ports. There is no need for an expensive establishment to refit a fleet which will never be used. A small flotilla would grow with the prosperity of the colony. It would not require public funds. A fleet is very expensive.... The large fleet should be abandoned. Kingston is an important site for the defence of Canada. It requires an establishment to maintain stores, buildings and wharfs to equip and arm gunboats and steamships on the lakes. It will construct the frames of boats built at Quebec and Montreal. A naval officer must be employed to superintend the yard and direct the use of naval force in an emergency. The abandonment of the dockyard and the recall of the naval officer will undermine the morale of the colony. The strength of the United States prevents Britain maintaining a superiority of ships on the Canadian lakes. This expenditure would preserve a delusion of superiority.

In his covering letter, Kempt thanked Wellington for his letter of 25 January and noted that "The Duke's opinion coincides with Kempt's over the suggested closure of the dockyard at Kingston, Canada, and recall of the naval officer in command there." This is the last reference to the Kingston dockyard and the defence of Canada in the Wellington Papers.¹⁷ Frustratingly, the duke seems not to have concerned himself with these matters again.

Back in Kingston, Barrie was asked in March 1831 to confirm "the number, size and power of the Canadian steamers operating on the lakes, and their suitability for war purposes in case of an emergency." His response was that all such vessels were too light and would only be of use as transports. He did acknowledge, however, that the ship *Psyche* "could readily be adapted to house two 140 horsepower engines" (Spurr 1977, 75-76). Two months later he informed his officers that most of the "fleet" that they were in Kingston to maintain and man was to be broken up. At auction, the only ship to find a buyer was the *St. Lawrence*, which went for just £25. The yard's stock of rigging raised £1,400. Although the yard was clearly destined for closure, it was not until 13 March 1834 that Barrie received the news from London. The newspapers became aware of it within days, with the *Kingston Chronicle* informing its readers that

We are sorry to learn that the report which has prevailed in town relative to the reduction of the Naval Establishment at this post is well founded. Commodore Barrie has received instructions to pay off the Cockburn schooner and the Dock yard Establishment here, and all the other stations in Canada, viz. Isle aux Noix, Grand River and Penetanguishene; and to send the Officers, Men and Stores to England. The breaking up of this department of the public service in Kingston will be detrimental to the different classes of trades people in the town, all of whom have more or less benefited by the liberal expenditure resulting from the station.

A week later the paper expressed concerns about how the decision would affect the town's social life:

Society in Kingston will sustain an irreparable loss by the removal of the gallant Commodore Barrie, with his amiable lady. The poor will lose a kind benefactor, and the deserving a generous patron. His heart was ever prompt, and his purse ever open for acts of beneficence, and however far he may be removed from us, let him be assured his memory will long flourish green and fresh in the hearts of all here who have known and appreciated his surpassing worth. (*Kingston Chronicle* 1834).

Once the decision had been taken to close the dockyard, the Barries prepared to move back to England. A hint of the standard of living enjoyed by the Commodore and his officers is given in the advertisements that began to appear in the newspapers. A Lieutenant Holbrook advertised “a pair of excellent Bay Horses, rising 5 years, a match ... free from vice, one having been used for twelve months to carry a lady.” The lieutenant was also selling a “small cabine piano forte” (*Kingston Chronicle* 1834). In June, Barrie’s furniture was put up for sale by auction. A very long list appeared in the *Chronicle*, including “Tables, chests of drawers, chairs, backgammon and chess board (‘with men complete’), a Piano Forte, a superior ditto (By Broadwood and Sons with extra keys), Globes, terrestrial and celestial, carpets, rugs, sofas and easy chairs ... large quantities of plate and silver ware, China dinner and tea sets, ivory handled knives and forks.” There were copious quantities of alcoholic drink, including “40 dozen superior old port, several cases of first rate Schiedam Gin and a few dozen Champaign, Claret and Steine.” Finally, there was a “double bodied London Phaeton and harness” (*Kingston Chronicle* 7 June 1834). Barrie had already sold his “full blooded Arab horse, Daghee ... for the low price of £500” in May (*Kingston Chronicle* 1834).

On 10 May 1834, the *Chronicle* was delighted to be able to inform its readers that

Captain Gildersleeve’s new steamboat was launched yesterday afternoon and now sits on the element whose bosom she adorns, as beautiful a specimen of marine architecture as ever came from a building yard on Lake Ontario, reflecting great credit on the enterprise and taste of all parties concerned. We were pleased at the current rumour that this fine ornament to our inland waters was to be called the *Cateraqui*, the aboriginal name for Kingston; yet we were equally pleased when we learnt by her baptismal rites, the name of a gallant and much esteemed public officer was to be perpetuated among us—that of COMMODORE BARRIE. The new vessel is to be worked by an engine of 70 horsepower and is expected to be ready about the first of July. Success to the *Commodore Barrie*!

There was no other public recognition of Barrie’s time in Kingston, and by mid-July he and his family were in Montreal, en route for New York and England. (*Montreal Gazette* 1834). Once home, King William IV immediately appointed him Knight Commander of the Order of the Guelphs and knighted him. In 1837 he was promoted to Rear-Admiral and in 1840 was made a Knight Commander of the Order of Bath. He retired to Swarthdale in Yorkshire, where he died on 7 June 1841 (Brock 1988, 50-51).

The Royal Navy's presence in Kingston during the period under investigation and its role as the main deterrent to any American invasion was anachronistic. The Duke of Wellington had, in 1819, correctly identified a more efficient and cost-effective means of defending Canada, especially the borders of the Great Lakes, using troops transported quickly via the growing canal system. The Americans had already recognized that maintaining naval stations on the lakes was unnecessary and had closed their bases in 1826. The *Kingston Chronicle* cited the *Niagara Gleaner's* delight on 10 May 1834 at a recent and symbolic event:

The Brig *Oneida*, 250 tons burthen, which carried 16 guns last war and annoyed us very much on this side of the water, is now hauled up high and dry on the Rail-way, undergoing a thorough repair. She has for some years past been employed in carrying oak timber across the lake. We hope she may never again be employed in annoying the peaceable inhabitants of Canada.

Britain's traditional approach to the defence of Upper Canada, especially those communities in the west of the province, was never viable. It was expensive, inefficient, and impracticable. Niagara was never a key region within this flawed strategy simply because it was indefensible, particularly where the river is narrow and comparatively shallow. The War of 1812 had revealed how easily the river could be crossed (both ways) and, given enough men, the forts taken. As Graves points out, "this happy and scenic region, far removed from the origins of the conflict, suffered from some of the war's worst depredations" (1994, 150). Wellington believed that the rapid introduction of reinforcing troops to the region was the best solution. Kingston, of course, could only be attacked by water (at least, in the early stages of a campaign) and the presence of a British fleet there made sense. By 1834, though, such an attack seemed unlikely and the inevitable decisions were taken in London.

Just as the Kingston Dockyard was closed and most of its assets sold, Niagara township also found itself under British scrutiny. The Public Record Office in England has two maps, both from the mid-1830s, which reveal some of the plans being made for the area. The first map, accredited to the year 1835, was drawn to "accompany the Report of the Commanding Royal Engineer to his Excellency the Governor of Upper Canada on the subject of the Military Reserves." It was dated 18 July 1836 and shows the "Ground reserved for Government at the Landing Place on the West Side of the Niagara river, and the proposed situation for wharf, stores etc." The other map is a "sketch of the Military reserves at Niagara

shewing the mode in which it is proposed to let the Ordnance premisses [*sic*] now occupied by the establishment."¹⁸ Just how significant these maps are is difficult to establish, but they suggest that Britain was seriously reducing its military commitments along the shores of the lakes. If Canada was to be defended against a predatory United States, the British government was moving towards a reactive, rather than proactive, policy.

The administration and the defence of the empire were to remain both a duty and a burden for Britain throughout the nineteenth century, and it was inevitable that the "mother country" should seek ways of reducing them. One was the granting of "representative" or even "responsible" government to the settler colonies, and with this came an assumption that self-government also meant self-defence. Although much of this took place in the second half of the century, it can be argued that the origins of this policy evolved during the aftermath of the War of 1812. Barrie and Wellington were part of this, the former as a victim and the latter as one of its perpetrators. As early as the 1830s, Canada, particularly Upper Canada, was maturing socially and economically, helped by a huge surge in immigration from all parts of the British Isles. Garrison towns such as Kingston had prospered, and, as Philp noted, the military helped brighten colonial life through "Their parades, their entertainments, and their sporting activities" (1949, 48). Barrie was clearly a past master at this but men like him were only sojourners, expecting to return home on some future date. Barrie's return was, of course, hastened by decisions made in London by men such as Wellington. The duke was a man blessed with clarity of vision and the ability to take a decision, as he himself understood: "There is a curious thing," he was reported as saying, "that one feels sometimes; when you are considering a subject, suddenly a whole train of reasoning comes before you like a flash of light; you see it all ... yet it takes you perhaps two hours to put on paper all that has occurred to your mind in an instant. Every part of the subject, the bearing of all the parts on each other, and all the consequences are there before you."¹⁹ The man who, in 1814, told Lord Liverpool that what Britain needed in America was "not a General, or general officers and troops, but a naval superiority on the Lakes" (Stanley 1983, 391) and who in 1819 proposed a means of effecting this, knew by 1831 that it was too expensive. If Stacey is to be believed, the duke never really accepted this himself; and if, in later years, the subject of Canadian defence was raised, Wellington was convinced that his scheme was the one that should have been adopted (Stacey 1963, 15).

Notes

1. The title of Wesley B. Turner's recent book on the conflict says it all—*The War of 1812: The War That Both Sides Won*.
2. Donald E. Graves has written a number of books on the War of 1812, many of them concentrating on a particular battle or incident; see, for example, *Where Right and Glory Lead! The Battle of Lundy's Lane, 1814* (2000) and *Red Coats and Grey Jackets: The Battle of Chippewa, 5 July 1814* (1994).
3. This was a far cry from the year 1780, when Britain had 10 armed ships on Lake Champlain, the largest being the *Royal George*, a 384-ton vessel with 26 guns and a crew of 100. See "A List of His Majesty's Armed Vessels on the Canadian Lakes, River St. Lawrence and Provincial Service in the Year 1780." Royal United Service Institution Naval manuscripts ref. RUSI 13, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK.
4. Malcolmson says that it was a brig (1998).
5. The *Charwell* was a brig, the *Netley* was a schooner, and the *Montreal* and the *St. Lawrence* were ships. The build of the other two is not known (Malcolmson 1998).
6. See the Spilsbury Family papers in the Archives of Ontario (F4328-1-0-4 and F4328-1-0-6). Francis Spilsbury's fortunes changed for a short while, for he was sent to Jamaica to join the sloop *Racehorse*. He travelled to Plymouth, England, in her but left the service in March 1834 and returned to Canada.
7. All quotations from Wellington come from the Wellington papers, held at the Archives and Special Collections, Hartley Library, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK. See WP1/622/1.
8. Wellington had already demonstrated his pragmatism when it came to British involvement in North America. G.F.G. Stanley, in *The War of 1812: Land Operations*, cites advice from the duke to Lord Liverpool while the Treaty of Ghent, which officially ended the war, was being negotiated: "Wellington's advice was to stop haggling and sign the peace" (Stanley 1983, 392).
9. The three men were Colonel Sir James Carmichael Smyth, Major Sir George Charles Hoste and Captain John B. Harries (see the Wellington Collection, University of Southampton, WP1/817/5).
10. P.J.G. Ransom states that the earliest proven example of a form of railway dates from 1604, in Nottingham, and was two miles in length (1990, 13).
11. Wellington's letter to Bathhurst (WP1/834/5), his instructions to John Smyth (WP1/861/7), and Smyth's letter to General Mann (WP1/911/3) can all be found in the Wellington Papers.
12. Wellington's correspondence with Dalhousie (WP1/720/12; WP1/754/33) and correspondence relating to the cost of fortifications at Kingston (WP1/1079/1-4) are held in the Wellington Papers.
13. Italics added. The letter is in the Wellington Papers (WP1/1101/2).
14. It was, of course, a time when Britain's ruling elite was under enormous pressure for political and electoral reform.

15. Kempt had written to the duke on 5 April 1830, asking to be allowed to return to London. He pointed out that he had not spent "an unbroken eighteen months in Britain for twenty seven years" (WP1/1106/20; Wellington's reply is at WP1/1174/8).
16. This was Vice-Admiral Sir Thomas Byam Martin, Comptroller of the Navy.
17. The Kempt-Graham correspondence is held in the Wellington Papers (WP1/1173/36).
18. Both maps are held in the Public Record Office, Map Collection, National Archives, Kew, London, UK (MPG1/762).
19. An entry in Lady Frances Salisbury's journal, quoted in E. Longford, *Wellington*. (2001 509-10).

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