

## Major John Richardson Canadian Patriot and Literary Nationalist

Alan James Finlayson

Volume 111, numéro 1, spring 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059967ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059967ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Finlayson, A. J. (2019). Major John Richardson: Canadian Patriot and Literary Nationalist. *Ontario History*, 111(1), 80–95. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059967ar>

### Résumé de l'article

*Le commandant John Richardson est reconnu comme « le père » de la littérature canadienne et considéré comme un des premiers historiens de la Guerre de 1812. Toutefois, même si ses écrits sont bien détaillés et fortement autobiographiques, ils ne sont pas suffisamment estimés par les historiens en tant que sources historiques. Ils fournissent néanmoins de justes représentations des perceptions du Haut-Canada et des prises de position similaires à celles qu'on retrouve chez Brock, Strachan, Mackenzie, Robinson, Baldwin et Ryerson. Richardson mérite également d'être davantage reconnu pour son rôle de patriote et de nationaliste canadien. Même s'il vivait à l'étranger, il proclamait haut et fort être « un Canadien » et espérait, de « faire infusion d'un esprit de littérature Nationale » dans la communauté canadienne. Ses écrits démontrent la fierté et la naissance de l'esprit canadien, et méritent considérablement plus d'attention de la part des historiens.*



# Major John Richardson

## Canadian Patriot and Literary Nationalist

by Alan James Finlayson

He has been described as “our first delineator of manners and customs,” “the most distinguished man of letters in Upper Canada,” a “cultural icon,” “the father of our literature,” “the major novelist of pre-Confederation Canada” and “the artist who first showed that Canadian history was interesting enough to be matter for literature.” He wrote what has been referred to as “the seminal Canadian novel” and his two most famous

novels together, are considered to be “our first national prose epic.”<sup>1</sup> He advocated for the use of history textbooks written by Canadians in schools and personifies the struggle of Canadian artists trying to survive in a Canadian market and Canadian literature against “Americanization.” Internationally acclaimed as the rival of James Fennimore Cooper, he has been designated by the Government of Canada as a “person of national historical significance,”<sup>2</sup> yet his novels, the contem-

<sup>1</sup> A.C. Casselman ed., *Richardson's War of 1812* (Toronto: Historical Publishing Co., 1902), “Introduction,” xiii; R. P. Baker, *A History of English Canadian Literature to the Confederation* (London: Oxford U Press, 1920), 125; Douglas Cronk ed., *Wacousta* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), “Editor’s Preface,” xiii; Donald Stephens ed., *The Canadian Brothers* Carleton University Press, 1992, “Editor’s Introduction,” lxix; James Reaney “Wacousta!” in John Moss ed., *Wacousta: A Critical Edition* (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1998) 483; Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman eds., “Introduction” to Richardson’s *Tecumseh, or, The Warrior of the West: A Poem of Four Cantos with Notes*, <<http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/longpoems/Tecumseh/index.htm>> (accessed on 25 September 2017); Michael Hurley, *The Borders of Nightmare*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 4, 85.

<sup>2</sup> See the “Persons of National Historical Significance” website, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Persons\\_of\\_National\\_Historic\\_Significance\\_\(Canada\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Persons_of_National_Historic_Significance_(Canada)) (accessed on 25 September 2017).

## *Abstract*

*Major John Richardson has been recognized as “the father” of Canadian literature as well an early historian of the War of 1812 but his writings, rich in detail and highly autobiographical, have not been sufficiently appreciated by historians as valuable historical source materials. Yet they provide accurate portrayals of contemporary Upper Canadian perceptions and attitudes similar to those found in the writings of the more popular Brock, Strachan, Mackenzie, Robinson, Baldwin, and Ryerson. Richardson also deserves greater recognition for his role as a Canadian patriot and nationalist. Despite living abroad, he consistently proclaimed himself “a Canadian”, and hoped, through his works, to “infuse” into the Canadian community “a spirit of National literature.” His writings reflect the pride and emerging Canadian national spirit and as such merit greater attention by historians.*

**Résumé:** *Le commandant John Richardson est reconnu comme « le père » de la littérature canadienne et considéré comme un des premiers historiens de la Guerre de 1812. Toutefois, même si ses écrits sont bien détaillés et fortement autobiographiques, ils ne sont pas suffisamment estimés par les historiens en tant que sources historiques. Ils fournissent néanmoins de justes représentations des perceptions du Haut-Canada et des prises de position similaires à celles qu'on retrouve chez Brock, Strachan, Mackenzie, Robinson, Baldwin et Ryerson. Richardson mérite également d'être davantage reconnu pour son rôle de patriote et de nationaliste canadien. Même s'il vivait à l'étranger, il proclamait haut et fort être « un Canadien » et espérait, de « faire infusion d'un esprit de littérature Nationale » dans la communauté canadienne. Ses écrits démontrent la fierté et la naissance de l'esprit canadien, et méritent considérablement plus d'attention de la part des historiens.*

porary response to them and his other personal actions have not been sufficiently recognized as important reflections of the Upper Canadian community and an emerging Canadian nationalism.

By the 1830s, a shift in identity was occurring in Upper Canada, with Canada replacing Britain as the focus of Upper Canadians' loyalty. The War of 1812 had given Upper Canadians a sense of pride and identity and what was perceived as British mismanagement and a British air of superiority angered Canadians.

The appointment and success of native Canadians was applauded and their increase both in population and as community leaders was significant. By the end of the decade, Canadians were being asked to tone down an “unnecessary zeal for the Parent State”<sup>3</sup> and John Beverly Robinson was concluding that the war had “produced in the British colonists a national character and feeling.”<sup>4</sup> That same year, 1840, another native-born Canadian, Egerton Ryerson, was writing that “CANADA is HOME...and any at-

<sup>3</sup> See “National Minstrelsy” in Carl Ballstadt, “The Quest for Canadian Identity in Pre-Confederation English-Canadian Literary Criticism” (M.A. Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1959), 94.

<sup>4</sup> John Beverly Robinson, *Canada and the Canada Bill* (1840) (New York: Johnson Reprint Company, 1967), 15.

tempt to excite feelings from the 'place of birth' against those who have been born in the 'place of their adopted residence' is unpatriotic, unchristian and unnatural."<sup>5</sup> In 1842, fellow Canadian Robert Baldwin was also declaring:

I am a Canadian born, son of a Canadian; the grandson of a man who made Canada his home when it was a howling wilderness. I am proud of my birth... and I wish to see that national feeling more generally appreciated from Sandwich to Gaspé [and two years later announced:] I... wish to see a provincial feeling pervade the whole mass of our population... to see every man belonging to us proud of the Canadian name, and of Canada as his country. [Then in 1846, he proclaimed:] I love the Mother Country, but I love the soil on which I live better."<sup>6</sup>

By 1850 it was even being suggested that the "limits of Upper Canada ought to extend to the Rocky Mountains on the West" and a resolution in favour of a federal union of all the British North American colonies was being put forward.<sup>7</sup>

It was into this nationalistic setting that Richardson returned and assumed a leadership role. Despite his having lived abroad for twenty-two years, he had kept abreast of Canadian happenings through the press and letters from his brother

Charles and he consistently identified himself as "a Canadian." He had done so in his "Prospectus" to his *Tecumseh* in 1828, and declared it again in a letter of March 1837 to Lord Glenelg, stating "I am myself a Canadian by birth and as such deeply interested in the welfare of the Provinces." That December, angry that the British Parliament had adjourned while the Canadas were in crisis, he wrote letters to the *Morning Post* again identifying himself as "Canadian... one of a family that has ever been foremost in its allegiance to the mother country"<sup>8</sup> and "as the news, which reached England by every packet was of a nature to induce the belief that my services might be made available in her defence, I resolved to embark forthwith."<sup>9</sup> He was set to leave on January 1, but his departure was delayed due to weather, and he arrived in early April. As Canada's first internationally acclaimed novelist, he had already had published two poems, five "memoirs," and three novels, one of which—*Wacousta*—had been "read by the whole court" of William IV, and was popular both in England and the United States and had established him as Cooper's rival.<sup>10</sup> Now, at home, he decided to take on what he

<sup>5</sup> Egerton Ryerson, *Christian Guardian*, 11 Nov. 1840, quoted by G. French "The Evangelical Creed in Canada" in W. L. Morton ed., *The Shield of Achilles* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Cross, *A Biography of Robert Baldwin: The Morning Star of Memory* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 2012), 122, 176, 177.

<sup>7</sup> See J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe: Voice of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1989), 230 and Donald Creighton, *John A Macdonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952), 145.

<sup>8</sup> Daymond and Monkman eds., "Prospectus" to Richardson's "Tecumseh," <http://www.canadianpoetry.ca/longpoems/Tecumseh/APPENDIX.HTM> (accessed on 25 September 2017); David Beasley, *The Canadian Don Quixote* (Simcoe: Davus Publishing, 2004), 133; and Cronk, "Editor's Introduction," xxxii.

<sup>9</sup> John Richardson, *Eight Years in Canada* (Montreal: H.H. Cunningham, 1847), 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> H. Taylor to J. Richardson, 7 August 1833 in Richardson *The Canadian Brothers* Stephens ed.,

termed the “weighty responsibility” of attempting “to infuse a spirit of National Literature into his native land” and help in the “formation of national character.”<sup>11</sup>

He began immediately, making plans for the publishing of a Canadian edition of *Wacousta* that summer and writing new chapters for its sequel *The Canadian Brothers*, which he submitted to *The Literary Garland* the following spring. He had begun the sequel in 1832 and had forwarded a chapter on the use of Indian allies in 1833 but had abandoned the project due to the resumption of his military career. Now, in 1839, he created the novel which he termed “in a great degree a national one” and which he said was designed to treat “the manners, habits, political and moral character” of Canadians and was “not to be confounded with mere works of fiction.”<sup>12</sup> He hoped to be “the means of bringing before the more vivid recollections of its population, the debt of gratitude Canada owes

to her most prominent defenders,” and that his book would “live in this country long after its writer shall have been gathered to his forefathers... because I think I can perceive... a time when the people of Canada having acquired a higher taste for literature than they now possess.”<sup>13</sup>

The book came out in February of 1840. It was not, however, his first “Canadian” work. In 1826-27 he had published his serialized memoir of 1812, *A Canadian Campaign*; in 1828 he had published his Canadian poem *Tecumseh*; and in 1832 he was careful to subtitle his *Wacousta* “A Tale of the Canadas.”<sup>14</sup> Just as he was proud to be a Canadian, his contemporaries were proud of him. Canadian pride in the fact that this new work was written by a Canadian was evident. *The Literary Garland* had hoped for the publication of a Canadian edition of *Wacousta* but now enthusiastically supported his new novel and referred to Richardson as “one who owns his birth-

---

“Preface,” 3-4; *The Court Magazine* review said he was “quite equal to the highly gifted Cooper” and praised the fact that his characters were British. See Douglas Cronk, “The Editorial Destruction of Canadian Literature: A Textual Study of Major John Richardson’s *Wacousta*; Or, The Prophecy” (M.A. Thesis Simon Fraser, 1977), 62-63. Historian Francis Parkman, a Cooper admirer, but who like Richardson “knew” Indians, considered Richardson’s portrayal superior. Francis Parkman, “The Works of James Fenimore Cooper” *The North American Review*, 74 (1852), 156.

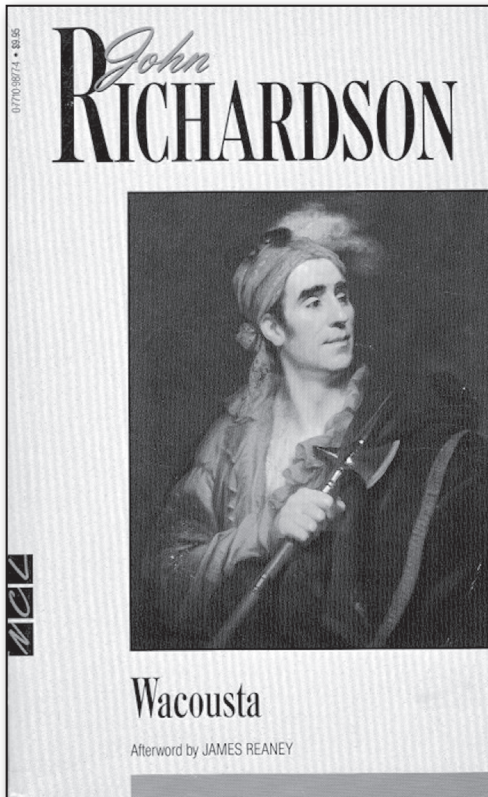
<sup>11</sup> Cronk, “Editor’s Introduction,” xxxix, xl.

<sup>12</sup> Stephens, “Editor’s Introduction,” lv; Richardson, *Eight Years*, 109; Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, “Preface,” 4.

<sup>13</sup> Richardson to Harvey, 20 December 1839. Richardson, *Eight Years*, 107-108.

<sup>14</sup> This sub-title is worthy of note for Richardson was attempting to glorify Canada’s past and was well aware that he was breaking new ground by writing about Canada. He was writing “a tale connected with a ground hitherto untouched by the wand of the modern novelist.” Cronk makes the point that Richardson, when writing *Wacousta*. “wrote as a Canadian with a British audience in mind, an audience he wished to persuade to view Canada’s heroic past with a more kindly and interested eye.” See Cronk, *Thesis*, 59, and Cronk ed., *Wacousta* (1832), title page and 3. His *Tecumseh* may have been written in 1823. See Richardson’s “Preface” in Daymond and Monkman, and Baker note in W.R. Riddell, *John Richardson* (Makers of Canadian Literature Series), (Toronto: Ryerson, 1923), 211.





The cover of a modern McClelland and Stewart edition of Richardson's famous novel, omitting the long sub-title and emphasizing the author's name.

place among us, and who is not, even in the literary world of England, 'unknown to fame.'" The *Montreal Herald* declared the novel "an honour to Canadian literature" and hoped that "the patriotic feeling which induced him to publish his novel in Canada instead of in London, as he might easily have done, will, independently of its sterling qualities, be duly appreciated by the public." The *Quebec Mercury* wanted it in "every library in these Provinces" because of its historical detail.<sup>15</sup>

The novel's value goes beyond its col-

ourful depiction of Canadian events and personalities, for not only does Richardson provide common Upper Canadian perceptions, but as L.E. Horning observed in 1894, "the independent spirit and thought of Richardson is shown in the opinion of current or recent events which he puts into the mouth of his characters."<sup>16</sup> An outstanding example occurs in his recounting of the opening events of the War of 1812 when he presents a situation in which British and Canadian officers under Brock argue. Having made it appear that a missing Canadian (Gerald Grantham) has been derelict in his duty, Richardson has a British officer remark: "Can there be any question of his fidelity? The Granthams are Canadian I understand." Another British officer then adds "this is the result of entrusting so important a command to a Canadian." Upon being challenged about the remark by Gerald's brother, the British officer, "with the advising air of a superior in rank" implies that a Canadian, has no right to question him and should be honoured that he has even been "received into a British regiment." Further angered by this slight, the young Canadian is then calmed by his uncle who advises him to "let the matter rest" and informs him that he too has had to listen to such comments "from persons not only older, but

<sup>15</sup> Stephens, "Editor's Introduction," xxxviii, li, xlix, liv.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Ballstadt ed., *Major John Richardson: A Selection of Reviews and Criticism* (Montreal: L.M. Lande Foundation, 1972), 49

much higher in rank.”<sup>17</sup>

The exchange may be imaginary, but perhaps not, for sensitivity by Canadians to a British attitude of superiority appears in the writings of other Upper Canadians of this period. The War of 1812 was a catalyst and turning point in the formation of an Upper Canadian identity. The experience had welded together the Loyalist sentiments of the original settlers with a new sense of pride shared by younger members of the community. Its impact on participants would last for years to come. Upper Canadians began referring to events as having happened “before or after the war” and according to historian C.P. Stacey, the war “revived and intensified” anti-American feelings and “provided the stuff of a nascent Canadian nationalism.”<sup>18</sup> A “Loyalty Myth” had been created by John Strachan which told how Upper Canadians “without the assistance of men or arms, except a handful of regular troops, repelled its invaders”; a hero’s monument to Brock was

constructed in the 1820s; and Robinson commented early in the decade that it would not be long before the British North American colonies would “begin to pride themselves on the possession of a national character.”<sup>19</sup> On the literary stage, new publications such as the *Canadian Magazine* (1823); the *Canadian Review* (1824); *The Canadian Literary Magazine* (1833), and the *Literary Garland* (1838) appeared. Articles by Canadians were highlighted as “original” papers while those of non-Canadians were termed “selected” papers.<sup>20</sup> Calls were made for works by “native talent” and visions were held of a day when “our academics have gained a name among the literati of the west.”<sup>21</sup>

With this surge of confidence also came increasing criticism of British handling of Canadian affairs. Even ultra-loyal Canadian Tories like Strachan became disillusioned, and felt alienated from “the government of that country [Britain].”<sup>22</sup> In 1826 William Lyon Mackenzie com-

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, Stephens ed., 33-41.

<sup>18</sup> George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 77-78, 187; and C.P. Stacey, “The War of 1812 in Canadian History” in M. Zaslow ed., *The Defended Border* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964), 336.

<sup>19</sup> Stacey, “The War of 1812,” 334; Robinson, *Four Pamphlets on the Subject of Confederation and Union of the Canadas 1822-25* (Toronto: Canadiana House, 1967), 50.

<sup>20</sup> See H. Pearson Gundy, “Literary Publishing” in Carl Klinck ed., *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 176-77 and Ballstadt, Thesis, 23.

<sup>21</sup> M. Fairley ed., *The Selected Writings of William Lyon Mackenzie 1824-37* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), 262 & 112.

<sup>22</sup> See Strachan’s letters to Bishop Mountain 1 Oct. 1812 and James McGill that November in G.M. Spragge ed., *John Strachan Letter Book 1812-34* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1946), 14 and 26; his 1824 “Observations” on “injudicious” appointments in J.L. Henderson ed. *John Strachan: Documents and Opinions* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1969), 146; his letter of 7 March, 1831 in R.G. Good, “The Letter Book of John Strachan 1827-34” (M.A. Thesis, Toronto, 1940) in the University of Toronto Archives; and his sermon of 14 Dec. 1838 in the “Strachan Papers” (MSS in the Ontario Archives). See also Charles Lindsey *The Life and Times of William Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion of 1837-8* (1862) (Toronto: Coles Publishing Co. 1971), 276-77.

plained of persons who perceived Canadians as “a race of mortals vastly inferior to the English and Yankees” and by 1828 Strachan had become indignant about Britain’s handling of provincial affairs and declared “we have not lost our birthright of British subjects by going to Canada nor can we submit to be deprived of the privileges it confers.”<sup>23</sup> Mackenzie in December of 1835 informed a colleague: “Until my return from England in the fall of 1833, I used what little influence I possessed with the yeomanry to persuade them that by petitioning England, a remedy could be found... . But I have been in England... I therefore, am less loyal than I was”<sup>24</sup> and the following year a visiting Anna Jameson observed “a general tone of complaint and discontent” among “all parties” of Upper Canadians—“they bitterly denounce the ignorance of the colonial officials at home.”<sup>25</sup> It should not be surprising therefore, that the *Literary Garland* praised Richardson’s novel not only for its re-iteration of the Loy-

alty Myth—“the readiness with which all classes and creeds flocked round the standard of their common country in an hour of doubt and danger”—but also for its “vindication” of “the colonial character” from “the aspersions hitherto too frequently cast upon it, as being secondary in sterling worth to that of the parent country.”<sup>26</sup> Research supports Robinson’s 1840 belief regarding the existence of a “national” feeling. S.F. Wise concluded that “a provincial community was being born and by 1841 it had taken on characteristics both distinctive and permanent...” and that “the focus of loyalty had... shifted from Britain to British North America... and that process was well under way before 1841.”<sup>27</sup> A Canadian nationality was being born.

Richardson, like other Upper Canadians, was deeply affected by the war and years later commented on how “each particular circumstance is present to my mind as though it had been an occurrence of yesterday.”<sup>28</sup> Born at Queenston in 1796,

<sup>23</sup> See *Colonial Advocate* 30 March 1826 in Fairley, *Selected Writings*, 111; and Strachan to Hale 29 Dec. 1828 in Good, “The Letter Book,” 51.

<sup>24</sup> R.A. MacKay, “The Political Ideas of William Lyon Mackenzie” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 3 (1937), 14; This was not unique. Wise notes that “It is remarkable... how conscious such Upper Canadian Tories as J.B. Robinson, William Macaulay, H.J. Boulton, George Markland and Christopher Hagerman became of their separate identities as Canadians when, at various times they visited the centre of the Empire, and discovered with a sudden shock how greatly Britain differed from their picture of it.” S.F. Wise, “Upper Canada and the Conservative Tradition,” *Ontario History* 59 (1967), 31-32.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, (1838) (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965) 50-51.

<sup>26</sup> Stephens, “Editor’s Introduction,” liii; Ballstadt, Thesis, 93-4.

<sup>27</sup> Wise, “Upper Canada,” 21, 31-32.

<sup>28</sup> Major John Richardson, *A Canadian Campaign*, (Simcoe: Davus Publishing 2011), 18. Students of Richardson such as Klinck and Duffy stress that the “emotional shocks which he then endured” as a youth of fifteen in the war impacted his writing. See Carl Klinck ed. *Wacousta* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), “Preface,” xxi; and Dennis Duffy, *A World Under Sentence: John Richardson and the Interior* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1996), 95.



he grew up in Amherstburg and enlisted as a fifteen-year-old volunteer in the 41st Regiment in June of 1812. He fought in all the major engagements of the Right Division of the army until taken prisoner at the Battle of the Thames sixteen months later. After his release, he sailed to Europe hoping to serve against Napoleon but arrived too late to see battle and was placed on half-pay. He returned to full service in late May of 1816 and served in the Barbados before returning to London in the fall of 1818. After spending some years in Paris, he settled in London where he began a prolific writing career as a poet, journalist, historian and novelist. His writings represent a reshaping of his colonial and War of 1812 experiences. As Dennis Duffy has written, he “was turning into novels the stuff of his own experience” and providing us with “the colonial psyche.” He relished the role of Canadian literary pioneer, hoping to cast light on the Canadian cultural landscape in much the way Scott and Cooper had done for their respective countries. Inspired by the success of Cooper, he chose to write about his personal wartime experiences and the events, characters, and issues he knew. In so doing, he shows himself to be very much a product of both his Canadian past and the present atmosphere in which he was writing. In Duffy’s view,

he was “casting his characters as embodiments of social and cultural issues” and “His writings preach from the house-tops the fears and obsessions others muttered only beneath their blankets.”<sup>29</sup> These perceptions and concerns may be seen to accurately coincide with those of other Upper Canadian leaders of the period and “ought to be viewed within a broad framework of Loyalist outlooks.” They provide a valuable historical perspective.

In his depiction of Americans in particular, Richardson shows himself to accurately reflect community perceptions. Although willing to praise “superior men” such as the American army officers at Detroit in 1812 and individual Americans such as Perry and Harrison,<sup>30</sup> his writings reveal a good deal of the “anti-American” imagery of his Upper Canadian contemporaries. In his serialized memoir of 1826 he had described Americans as “those whose perfidy had long been proverbial with the Indian race” and stressed that they were the aggressors in the war. Two years later in *Tecumseh*, he had called them “ruthless despoilers” and even in his 1847 non-fictional *Eight Years in Canada*, he refers to them as “the artful deluder;” and “seducers” of Canada. He saw in the United States a “spirit of acquisition” and viewed the War of 1812 as only an excuse by them for conquest.<sup>31</sup> Most sig-

<sup>29</sup> Duffy, *World*, 11-12, 115; and his *Gardens, Covenants, Exiles: Loyalism in the Literature of Upper Canada/Ontario* (Toronto: U of T Press, 1982), 46, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, Stephens ed., 59; Richardson, *Eight Years in Canada*, 85; Richardson, *War of 1812*, Casselman ed., 161, 213. He also defends Hull in his novel *Wau-nan-gee (1851)*, John Richardson, *Wau-nan-gee (New York: Yurita Press 2015) Chapter XX*.

<sup>31</sup> Richardson, *A Canadian Campaign*, 13; *Tecumseh*, Canto 1, Line 232; *Eight Years*, 78; *The Canadian Brothers*, 86.

nificantly, just as he shared the belief that Canadians were “the prominent actors” in the war—the Loyalty Myth—he accepted that the belief that American emigrants were degenerate characters. Not one to avoid editorial comment, he told readers of *The Canadian Brothers*:

For many years previous to the war, adventurers from the United States, chiefly men of desperate fortunes, and even more desperate characters, had, through a mistaken policy, been suffered to occupy the more valuable portion of the country. Upper Canada, in particular, was infested by these people.<sup>32</sup>

Representing these people—this “worthless set”—is the Desborough family, described by Richardson in a letter to the press promoting his forthcoming novel, as “some of the veriest villains that ever disgraced human nature.” The family is depicted as totally lacking in principle: boastful, crude, lazy, and cunning; and willing to smuggle, seduce, and spy to achieve material gain. The patriarch, Jeremiah, is made to shoot a man in the back and is a symbolic traitor—“an individual of which, unfortunately for Canada, too many of the species had been suffered to take root within her soil.”<sup>33</sup> The war, in fact, is presented as a positive event in that it was “the indirect means of purging her unrepugnant soil of a

set of hollow hearted persons, who had occupied the place and enjoyed all the advantages of loyal men” and Richardson warned Canadians that the mistake of opening the border to American immigrants must never happen again but “we think the cloven foot has been too openly displayed to afford much chance to the Americans on that score.”<sup>34</sup> In a later novel, *Westbrook, The Outlaw*, Richardson again attacked the American “Late Loyalist” settlers by choosing to highlight the career of an American-born Upper Canadian, Andrew Westbrook, a man who aided the Americans during the war, terrorized the countryside, and whose name Richardson noted in 1851, “is notorious... even to this day.” The character of Westbrook was made to assume monstrous proportions until even his fellow-American characters see him as “desperately wicked” and refuse to acknowledge him as an American.<sup>35</sup>

These negative characterizations, however, may be seen to conform to the views held by many Upper Canadians of Americans and of the United States. Upper Canadian literature during this period whether in the form of the novel, sermon or newspaper, abounds with negative images of the “Yankee.” Before the war, many Upper Canadians already held

<sup>32</sup> Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, Stephens ed., 40, 95; for another reference to Canadians being the “prominent defenders” see his letter to Harvey of 20 December 1839 in Richardson, *Eight Years*, 107-108.

<sup>33</sup> Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers*, Stephens ed., 284, 95; and Richardson to *Quebec Mercury* 4 May 1839, in Stephens, “Editor’s Introduction,” xxxix

<sup>34</sup> Richardson *The Canadian Brothers*, Stephens ed., 97; and Richardson, “Jeremiah Desborough” in *The Literary Garland*, March 1839, quoted in Stephens’ “Editor’s Introduction,” xl.

<sup>35</sup> John Richardson, *Westbrook, The Outlaw; or The Avenging Wolf: An American Border Tale* (Simcoe: Davus Publishing, 2004), 1, 82.

a negative view of Americans. Strachan described Americans in 1807 as “vain and rapacious and without honor—they are hurried on to any action provided they gain money by it.”<sup>36</sup> A group of citizens in March 1811 addressed Lt-Gov. Gore and urged him to introduce legislation limiting the entrance of Americans. Brock in early 1812 worried about the influence of Americans on the colonial Assembly, and described them as “the most abandoned characters” who had come to Upper Canada to “seek impunity in this province from crimes of high enormity committed in the States.”<sup>37</sup> In 1815, Robinson termed the United States “unprincipled” and saw American settlers to be “thousands and thousands of stragglers” who had come to Upper Canada “to elude the pursuit of their creditors.”<sup>38</sup> A work of 1816 warned of “Yankee tricksters”<sup>39</sup> and five years later a visiting John Howison presented Americans as possessors of coarse vulgar habits who lacked sensibility and rushed madly about in search of material gain. He presented the United States as a nation of vain, loud speculators lacking in moral principle. In fact, Howison states “most of the American private soldiers were entirely

destitute of moral principle, or any sense of decency, and often exhibited a wanton and unblushing profligacy.” Yet he was not in Upper Canada at the time of the war and can therefore only have received this information from Upper Canadian contacts such as his friend, Canadian war veteran William Hamilton Merritt who himself termed American conduct in the war “infamous in the Extreme.” Admitting that he had arrived in Upper Canada with views “somewhat unfavourable” to the Americans, Howison stated that he “did not imbibe *all* the prejudices of the Canadians.”<sup>40</sup> That these prejudices were still present in the 1830s and had widespread acceptance may be seen in the fact that Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie, and Samuel Strickland all observed and accepted them. Moodie says they “left their country for their country’s good”; Traill refers to them as “a loquacious, boasting people” and “persons of no reputation, many of whom had fled to the Canadas to escape from debt, or other disgraceful conduct”; and Strickland goes so far as to state “it is a well-known fact, that many of the early frontier settlers were persons who had evaded payment of their just debts

<sup>36</sup> John Strachan to Dr. James Brown, 20 Oct. 1807 in Spragge, *John Strachan Letter Book*, viii. Strachan, as a teacher and minister had a unique opportunity to instill and disseminate his biases. See S.F. Wise “Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History” *United Church of Canada Archives Bulletin*, XVII (1965), 3-18. (Republished in A.B. McKillop and P. Romney eds., *God’s Peculiar Peoples* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> E.A. Cruikshank, “A Study of Disaffection in Upper Canada in 1812-15,” in Zaslow ed., *The Defended Border*, 206-207.

<sup>38</sup> S.F. Wise, *Canada Views the United States: Nineteenth-Century Political Attitudes* (Toronto: Macmillan 1967), 42; Sheppard, 229.

<sup>39</sup> G.M. Craig, “British Travellers in Upper Canada 1815-1867” *Ontario History*, 43 (1951), 181.

<sup>40</sup> John Howison, *Sketches of Upper Canada* (London: Whittaker, 1821), 90, 275-76.

or perhaps legal penalties for worse offences by crossing the lines, and forming settlements in Canada.”<sup>41</sup> The common elements evident in the image supports Wise’s contention that Upper Canadians possessed what he called a “frozen image” and that “[T] heir picture of the United States was a projection of their own fears and emotions, of their sense of living in a hostile world, of their anxiety for their own survival, and of their uncertainties about their special place in North America.” Richardson’s portrayals conform to an accepted and widespread image.<sup>42</sup>

Richardson believed that “the romance of real life is often more stirring than that of fiction”<sup>43</sup> and took seriously the role of “historian” not only in the writing his actual histories, but in the creation of his historical novels. He saw works based on reality as being of greater worth than “mere” works of imagination and sought to educate the public by presenting much of his history “through the most attractive and popular medium”—the novel or poem.<sup>44</sup> This had been a goal throughout his career. As early as 1826 with his first publication, a serialized “memoir” of the “Operations of the Right Division of the Army of Up-

per Canada, during the American War of 1812,” he stated his intention of giving “a faithful account” and assured readers that “no one incident will be found committed to these pages which may not be attested by every officer who served with the right division of the Canadian army.” When challenged as to the accuracy of some of his statements, he stressed his seriousness about “strictly fulfilling... the duty of the historian” and wanted “to clear my narrative from the charge of falsehood.”<sup>45</sup> He also wanted to accurately depict “a just idea of the character” of the Indian people, something he felt had not yet been accomplished.<sup>46</sup> Two years later, he revealed the same devotion to accuracy and desire to commemorate the life of Tecumseh whom he had known personally, in his poem of that name. In both his “Prospectus” and “Preface” he tells of his “desire to see the memory of so distinguished and extraordinary a man perpetuated”; “to rescue the name of this truly great man”; and “to preserve the memory of one of the noblest and most gallant spirits that ever tenanted the breast of man.” He also attests to its truthfulness: “a mere work of imagination it is not.... Tecumseh, such as he is

---

<sup>41</sup> Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*. 2 Vols. (London: Bently, 1854), I, 81-82; Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (London: Clowes and Sons, 1836), 293; Samuel Strickland *Twenty-seven Years in Canada West*, 2 Vols. (London: Bently, 1853), I, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson reflects the insecurity felt by Upper Canadians of the period in a letter to the Earl of Bathurst in 1816: “It is idle to talk of absolute security anywhere in the province... the Inhabitants of Canada, My Lord,... are unfortunately doomed to a constant, anxious speculation about the probable loss, or preservation of everything they possess.” S.F. Wise, *Canada Views the United States*, 42, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Richardson, *Eight Years*, 91

<sup>44</sup> Richardson, “Forward” to *Wau-nan-gee*, Quoted in Beasley, *Canadian Don Quixote*, 280.

<sup>45</sup> Richardson, *A Canadian Campaign*, 12, 102, 112.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

described, once existed; nor is there the slightest exaggeration in any of the high qualities and strong passions ascribed to him." He was proud to refer to himself as "Poet, the first of his native soil... but also... Historian"<sup>47</sup> and now, in the "Preface" to his *The Canadian Brothers*, he reminded readers that this work as well was "not to be confounded with mere works of fiction." He clearly reveals his national sentiments, hoping to highlight "the identity of those who were the most conspicuous among its defenders during the era it embraces"<sup>48</sup> and offered to sell it at a lesser price to Canadians because he saw "the work being in a great degree a national one" and Canadians had shown "so strong a national (that is to say Canadian) spirit." He also offered to sell what he termed his "NATIONAL AND HISTORICAL WORKS" (*Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers*) as a set, with his *Tecumseh* at half price "thus completing" he said, "the series of CANADIAN WORKS."<sup>49</sup>

Richardson was also played a leadership role in other "national" projects. He saw Canadian students reading text-

books written by Americans: "Canadian schools... stocked with trash that is, from time to time, poured into them from the pens of the most incapable of American authors" and the issue was "a matter... essential to the correct formation of national character."<sup>50</sup> Nor was he alone concerned. Having been personally encouraged to write by the *Montreal Herald*, he told readers of his *New Era* that

[S]everal of our contemporaries having intimated a desire that an accurate account of the events of the War of 1812 in this country, should be given by those who participated in it... we shall publish a 'Narrative of the Operations of the Right Division of the Army of Upper Canada.'<sup>51</sup>

This issue was not new, nor would it disappear. In 1815, a letter had appeared in the *Kingston Gazette* complaining of the use in schools of "books imported from the United States" and calling for the need "to make some regulations respecting, both imported school books, and imported teachers."<sup>52</sup> Richardson took action, declaring that it was

a humiliating yet undeniable fact that there are few young men of the present generation

<sup>47</sup> Richardson, "Prospectus of 1 March 1828 and "Preface" 18 May 1828, Daymond and Monkman eds. <http://www.canadianpoetry.ca/longpoems/Tecumseh/APPENDIX.HTM> (accessed on 25 September 2017)

<sup>48</sup> Richardson to Harvey 20 December 1839 in *Eight Years* 107-108.

<sup>49</sup> Stephens, "Editor's Introduction," lv; lvii-iii.

<sup>50</sup> Richardson, *Eight Years*, 206;

<sup>51</sup> Riddell, *John Richardson*, 211.

<sup>52</sup> Letter of "Palemon" in *Kingston Gazette* 19 September 1815 in A. Bowler (ed.) *The War of 1812* (Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Winston 1973), 80-82. In 1846, the issue reappeared in a debate on a school bill with the suggestion that the province should move toward employing only "Canadian teachers." Cross, 177. In the 1960s, it emerged again. See A.B. Hodgetts, *What Culture, What Heritage?* (Toronto: O.I.S.E. 1968) and Robin Mathews and James Steele, *The Struggle for Canadian Universities* (Toronto: Newpress, 1969). Also of relevance is J. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000).



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 neighbouring Republic... Or, if they have read of these matters, their information has been derived through the corrupt channel of American publications... which have a tendency to pervert facts.

He conducted additional research and expanded his previous memoir, *A Canadian Campaign*, for use in Canadian schools as a text, writing in a detailed narrative style which he hoped would inspire and recall for students “the gallant deeds performed by their Fathers, fighting side by side, with the troops of England in defence of their invaded firesides.”<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately, his efforts did not meet with success. Because of his highly critical comments concerning American accounts and actions, the Reform Party pressured the Department of Education to withdraw its promise to use his history as a textbook in fear of upsetting the Americans, and the projected second and third volumes were never written.<sup>54</sup> He also tried to stimulate Canadian culture through newspaper publishing, most notably *The New Era, or Canadian Chronicle* and *The Canadian Loyalist and Spirit of 1812 or The Native Canadian*—

appropriate titles for Richardson but both failed.<sup>55</sup>

Despite his hopes of “a time when these fine provinces shall have risen into a position to enable them to take their stand among the nations of the earth”<sup>56</sup> and a dream of being able to succeed as a professional writer in Canada, a reading market simply did not exist and he moved to New York City. Before leaving, he was honoured with a dinner as a “small testimony of the esteem entertained by your grateful countrymen...” which reveals the esteem in which he was held as well the new “national” spirit. L.C. Kearney, Secretary of the Committee responsible for hosting the event, proclaimed: “For myself... I shall ever feel proud, as an adopted Canadian, to hear fame distinguish the character of a gentleman who, by the splendour of his genius has shed an additional lustre on his native country.”<sup>57</sup>

In New York, he continued to write and published four new novels as well as at least seven short stories. Editor Samuel F. Nichols witnessed the “unprecedented popularity” of his historical novel *Hard-scrabble* and announced its forthcoming sequel *Wau-nan-gee* by “Major Richardson” who “has received the eminent

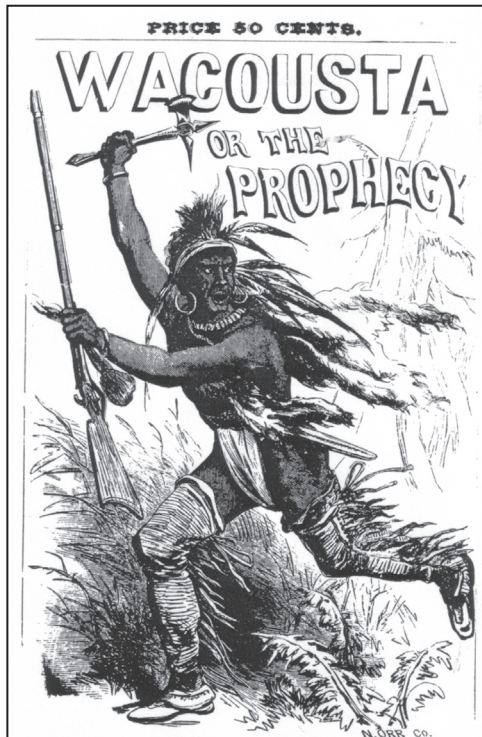
<sup>53</sup> Richardson, *Eight Years*, 205 and *War of 1812* (1842) “Preface,” Casselman ed., 1.

<sup>54</sup> Riddell in 1923 praised it as “a personal narrative,” a “historical treasury,” and “a worthy piece of literature”; and Windsor in 1965 as “[m]uch the best of the early histories of the War of 1812.” Sandy Antal, however, attacks it as “error-ridden. See Riddell, *John Richardson*, 95, 200; Kenneth Windsor, “Historical Writing in Canada (to 1920)” in Klinck ed. *Literary History*, 214; and Sandy Antal, *A Wampum Denied: Procter’s War of 1812* (Second edition, Montreal: McGill University Press 2011), “Preface,” xxi.

<sup>55</sup> See Desmond Pacey “A Colonial Romantic: Major John Richardson, Soldier and Novelist” *Canadian Literature*, 1, #3 (1960), 51.

<sup>56</sup> Richardson, *Eight Years*, 36.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.



*Major John Richardson's Wacousta; or, the Prophecy: a Tale of the Canadas was first published in three volumes in Edinburgh in 1832. After Richardson moved to New York City in 1849, much of his work was published through De Witt and Davenport who were responsible for this fanciful cover design.*

distinction from some of the best critics on both sides of the Atlantic, of being considered The Best Living Writer of Graphic Indian Tales surpassing James Fenimore Cooper.<sup>58</sup> Despite the popularity of his writing, however, he suffered economically “the victim of rapacious publishers” according to fellow writer and acquaintance George Thompson.<sup>59</sup> He was not unique in this regard for “[t]wo-thirds of the literary men, like Rich-

ardson, were not listed in the city directory” and Cooper was in fact, “the only American author before 1850 to support his family primarily from his royalties.” In June of 1851, he was asking his friend Rufus Griswold for a loan until he received funds from his publisher<sup>60</sup> to whom he sold the rights to *Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers*. He was asked to make “slight alterations” and was expecting minor changes, but they based their “new” edition of *Wacousta* on Waldies’ 1833 pirated version, one which Richardson had previously termed “abridged and very imperfect” and which had cut out 15,000 of his words, removing all references to “Canada”—it was called “A Tale of Detroit and Michilimackinac”—and “anti-American” features from the original. As a result, the new editions of his “national” novels were so “Americanized” that “readers could no longer be said to be reading what the author wrote.”<sup>61</sup> Although “a critical and popular success,”<sup>62</sup> the 1851 American edition of *Wacousta* was no longer “A Tale of the Canadas” which sought to glorify

<sup>58</sup> Beasley, *Canadian Don Quixote*, 286-93, 266.

<sup>59</sup> Hugh MacDougall, “The Novels of John Richardson,” “The Canadian Cooper,” presented online at <<http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/suny/2011sunymacdougall.html>> (accessed on 25 September 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Beasley, *Canadian Don Quixote*, 280; Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 412; Richardson's letter to Rufus Griswold, June 1851 in Cronk, Thesis, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Cronk, *Wacousta*, “Editor's Preface,” xiii, lx.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, xli.

British soldiers, but became merely “An Indian Tale.” He changed publishers that December.<sup>63</sup> *Matilda Montgomery*—the new name for *The Canadian Brothers* was also popular—going through six editions by 1888—but it too had been substantially “altered” with sections from the original text such as his enthusiastic description of the Canadian victory at Queenston Heights being omitted; the role of the British and Canadians downplayed; American character traits softened; “Canadian” landmarks made “American”; and the war itself “no longer played a vital role.” Stephens writes that it was “not predominantly a Canadian war or presented from a Canadian point of view. ...Rather the emphasis shifted... to a private melodrama of the revenge of a spurned mistress.”<sup>64</sup> Only within the last thirty years have Canadians even been able to read Richardson’s original versions of these two novels.<sup>65</sup>

Like Cooper, Richardson created what has been described as an “an intensely re-imagined past.”<sup>66</sup> While professors of English have carefully studied his

works, Canadian historians have focused on the observations of non-Canadian visitors or newly arrived emigrants for information about the Upper Canadian community in this period. Richardson’s perceptions and characterizations have not been compared with those of his Upper Canadian contemporaries and, as Duffy has observed, there is a need “to explore some of the historical and cultural factors behind his work”<sup>67</sup> W.R. Taylor in a 1957 cultural study observed: “There are many things about the history of an era that cannot be learned from its literature, but historians, it seems to me, have been too timid about searching out the things that can.”<sup>68</sup> This would seem to be the case with Richardson. His *The Canadian Brothers* in particular has value not only as “an early attempt to give expression to the spirit of nationality,” but for its accurate reflection of current stereotypes and sentiments. Baker saw it as Richardson’s “most significant” work and called it “one of the most significant books of its time.”<sup>69</sup> Even if one does not accept Richardson’s works as “great

<sup>63</sup> He stated “the piratical reprint in Waldies’ Circulating Library, is incorrect several of the most forcible passages in the book being left out altogether.” In 1842 he said only the English (1832) edition was the “correct one.” Cronk, Thesis, 41, 43, 45, 50, 63, 68.

<sup>64</sup> Stephens, “Editor’s Introduction,” lxi-lxiii. See also Riddell, *John Richardson*, 59-61. Stephens remembers being excited at discovering the novel as a student in 1954: “At last, I thought, a novel blending fact and fiction about the famous battle of Queenston Heights.” See Stephens, “Editor’s Preface,” xiii.

<sup>65</sup> See the Cronk (1987) and Stephens (1992) CEECT editions of *Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers* respectively. The lack of availability of these texts has led to a misreading of the quality of Richardson’s novels according to Cronk, Thesis, 197-204, 204-212), and perhaps also partially explains historians’ neglect of his work.

<sup>66</sup> Alan Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town*, 7

<sup>67</sup> Dennis Duffy, *A World Under Sentence*, 10, 11.

<sup>68</sup> W.L. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 16

<sup>69</sup> Baker, *A History of English Canadian Literature*, 133-35.

literature”, as Professor Ramsay Cook observed, “sometimes in cultural history mediocre literature may reveal more about the values and concerns of a society in a given time than great literature.”<sup>70</sup> As Riddell observed in 1923, this novel in particular, is “instilled with the life and thought of a new nation even then beginning to take shape.”<sup>71</sup>

A.C. Casselman, Richardson’s first major biographer observed that “when Thackeray was a stripling; when Dickens had not yet become a reporter, Richardson was winning... applause from the English press and a large audience of English readers” and that his works were “an instance in which we must go to fiction for reliable history.”<sup>72</sup> Like Cooper and Dickens, he turned to his past to create his novels and has provided us with evidence of a nascent Canadian nationalism. Not “mere fiction,” his novels and histories record what a Canadian of the period perceived. As Duffy has stated, “we need to relate the colonial experiences that Richardson knew at firsthand and to what he made of it in his writing,” to recognize the “historical

and cultural factors behind his work,” and study “what the Canadian imagination has reacted to... things about this environment that nothing else will tell us.”<sup>73</sup> Seen as a major figure in Canadian literary history, his writing and role as a Canadian “nationalist” has not been sufficiently recognized. As Carl Klinck noted, “Literary *activity*” had a role to play “in the positive development of a separate people”<sup>74</sup> and Richardson was at the center of this activity. He fought for Canada in the War of 1812; returned in 1838 when he felt she was in crisis; promoted interest in her through his poetry and historical novels; and sought to encourage the growth of a Canadian culture through his attempts at newspaper publishing, his writing of Canadian history, and the dissemination of his writings. In 1844, a visiting J.R. Godley made the observation that “[t]he Canadians are neither British nor American... [H]ere is a national character in process of formation.”<sup>75</sup> Major John Richardson and his writings deserve greater recognition as an important element of that process and development.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ramsay Cook, “The Uses of Literature in Cultural History” a paper prepared for the Canada Studies Foundation Workshop on Art and Literature, 1-2 April 1971.

<sup>71</sup> Riddell, *John Richardson*, 206-207.

<sup>72</sup> Casselman, “Introduction,” xlv.

<sup>73</sup> Duffy, *World*, 10; Northrup Frye, “Conclusion,” in Klinck ed., *Literary History of Canada*, 822.

<sup>74</sup> C.F. Klinck, “Literary Activity in the Canadas 1812-1841” in Klinck ed., *Literary History of Canada*, 125.

<sup>75</sup> J.R. Godley in G.M. Craig ed., *Early Travellers in the Canadas 1791-1867* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956), 144.