

## **“Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance”: the Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Canadian Loyalist History**

Cecilia Morgan

Volume 5, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031079ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031079ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Morgan, C. (1994). “Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance”: the Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Canadian Loyalist History. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 5(1), 195–212. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031079ar>

### Article abstract

In late nineteenth-century English Canada, particularly in Ontario, national identity and discourses of loyalty were frequently linked to Canadian history in general and, specifically, the legacy of the War of 1812. The commemoration of this war was especially important for those writers and historians who wished to maintain the country's link to Britain for, during this conflict, the colonial population had supposedly demonstrated their loyalty and devotion to Britain by helping to repulse American attacks. Both “national” historians and those who were members of the local historical societies that emerged in the 1880s wrote about the war and, in particular, male military heroes such as Major-General Isaac Brock. However, during this period a female symbol of national identity and loyalty to Britain also emerged, that of Laura Secord. While both male and female historians were interested in Secord, it was largely through the efforts of Anglo-Celtic, upper- and middle-class women that Secord became a heroine of the War of 1812. Many of these women were firm supporters of imperialism and the maintenance of British traditions in Canada, as well as being active in women's suffrage groups and other, related causes such as temperance. Their celebrations of Secord's walk and the narratives which they constructed about her contribution to Upper Canadian loyalty are significant not only for their recognition of women's contribution to Canadian history; they also help illustrate the relationships of gender, race, and imperialism in Canadian feminist and nationalist discourses.

# **“Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance”: the Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Canadian Loyalist History**

**CECILIA MORGAN**

## ***Résumé***

*In late nineteenth-century English Canada, particularly in Ontario, national identity and discourses of loyalty were frequently linked to Canadian history in general and, specifically, the legacy of the War of 1812. The commemoration of this war was especially important for those writers and historians who wished to maintain the country's link to Britain for, during this conflict, the colonial population had supposedly demonstrated their loyalty and devotion to Britain by helping to repulse American attacks. Both “national” historians and those who were members of the local historical societies that emerged in the 1880s wrote about the war and, in particular, male military heroes such as Major-General Isaac Brock. However, during this period a female symbol of national identity and loyalty to Britain also emerged, that of Laura Secord. While both male and female historians were interested in Secord, it was largely through the efforts of Anglo-Celtic, upper- and middle-class women that Secord became a heroine of the War of 1812. Many of these women were firm supporters of imperialism and the maintenance of British traditions in Canada, as well as being active in women's suffrage groups and other, related causes such as temperance. Their celebrations of Secord's walk and the narratives which they constructed about her contribution to Upper Canadian loyalty are significant not only for their recognition of women's contribution to Canadian history; they also help illustrate the relationships of gender, race, and imperialism in Canadian feminist and nationalist discourses.*

\* \* \* \*

*À la fin du dix-neuvième siècle au Canada anglais, et particulièrement en Ontario, l'identité nationale et les discours de loyauté à la couronne accompagnaient souvent l'écriture de l'histoire canadienne, spécialement quand il s'agissait des conséquences de la Guerre de 1812. La commémoration de ce conflit était importante notamment pour les écrivains et les historiens soucieux de perpétuer le lien du pays avec la Grande-Bretagne. En effet, au cours de la guerre, la population était censée avoir*

---

Much of the research and writing of this paper was conducted with the financial assistance of Canada Employment. I would also like to thank Colin Coates, Mariana Valverde, and the *Journal's* anonymous readers for their much-appreciated suggestions and encouragement. The members of the gender, history, and national identities study group have provided invaluable comments and support: Lykke de la Cour, Paul Deslandes, Stephen Heathorn, Maureen McCarthy, and Tori Smith

*démontré sa dévotion et son allégeance à la métropole, en aidant à repousser les attaques américaines. Les écrits sur la guerre se retrouvent à la fois chez les historiens «nationaux» et chez ceux qui appartenaient aux sociétés d'histoire locales qui se répandirent au cours des années 1880. La plupart des récits mirent en valeur des héros masculins comme le général de division Isaac Brock. Cependant, la période vit aussi émerger un symbole féminin d'identité nationale et de loyauté, celui de Laura Secord. Bien qu'hommes et femmes historiens s'intéressèrent au personnage, c'est avant tout grâce aux efforts de femmes anglo-celtes des classes moyennes et supérieures que Laura Secord devint une héroïne de la Guerre de 1812. En plus d'adhérer fermement à la cause de l'impérialisme et d'encourager le maintien des traditions britanniques au Canada, la plupart de ces femmes appartenaient à des groupes promouvant le suffrage féminin et d'autres causes connexes comme la tempérance. Leur glorification de la marche de Secord, de même que les récits qu'elles ont construits au sujet de sa contribution à la loyauté du Haut-Canada, apparaissent lourds de sens non seulement pour leur reconnaissance de l'apport des femmes à l'histoire canadienne, mais encore parce qu'ils aident à illustrer les relations entre impérialisme, race et rapports sociaux de sexe dans les discours féministes et nationalistes canadiens.*

To most present-day Canadians, Laura Secord is best-known as the figure-head of a candy company, her image that of a young, attractive woman wearing a low-cut ruffled white gown.<sup>1</sup> Some may even harbour a vague memory from their high-school courses in Canadian history of her walk in 1813 from Queenston to Beaver Dams, to warn British troops of an impending American attack. From the mid-nineteenth century, the story of that walk has been told by a number of Canadian historians of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada. Its military implications in assisting the British during the War of 1812 have been the subject of some rather heated debate. Did Laura Secord actually make a valuable contribution to the war? Did her news arrive in time and was it acted upon? However, another and as yet little-discussed issue is the way in which late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century historians attempted to transform Secord into a heroine, a symbol of female loyalty and patriotism in this period's narratives of Loyalist history.

As historian Benedict Anderson argues, the formation of modern national identities has involved more than the delineation of geographically defined boundaries and narrow political definitions of citizenship. Nations, Anderson tells us, are "imagined political communities," created by their citizens through a number of political and cultural institutions and practices: shared languages, newspapers, museums, and the census. Furthermore, as Anderson (and others) have emphasized, it is also within narratives of

---

1. A Dorian Gray-like image that, as the company has enjoyed pointing out, becomes younger with the passage of time. See the advertisement, "There must be something in the chocolate," *Globe and Mail*, November 25, 1992, A14.

“the nation’s” history that these imagined communities are formed and national identities are created.<sup>2</sup> To the promoters of late-nineteenth century Canadian nationalism and imperialism, such narratives were of critical importance in understanding Canada’s link to Britain and British political, social, and cultural traditions. As Carl Berger argues in *The Sense of Power*, “history in its broadest cultural sense was the medium in which [these traditions were] expressed and history was the final and ultimate argument for imperial unity.”<sup>3</sup> Those who wrote these historical narratives also worked diligently to create national heroes who symbolized loyalty and the preservation of the imperial link. Historians interested in early nineteenth-century Ontario history found that a cast of such figures lay conveniently close to hand: Major-General Sir Isaac Brock and the Upper Canadian militia, the colony’s saviours during the American invasion of 1812.

But Brock and the militia were not the only significant figures to be commemorated and celebrated, for it was during this period that Laura Secord became one of the most significant female symbols of Canadian nationalism. As feminist historians have pointed out, the formation of imagined national communities has been frequently, if not inevitably, differentiated by gender. While Anderson’s work has been extremely influential on historians’ understanding of national identities, he fails to recognize “that women and men may imagine such communities, identify with nationalist movements, and participate in state formations in very different ways.”<sup>4</sup> And, in their use of iconography, monuments, or written narratives of the nation’s history, proponents of nationalism have frequently relied upon gender-specific symbols and imagery.<sup>5</sup> Yet in these textual and visual representations of nationalities, gender as an analytic category has also varied according to its context and has been influenced by other categories and relationships, particularly those of race, class, religion, and sexuality. By looking at the process whereby Secord became a national heroine and at the narratives that were written

- 
2. This term has been an invaluable methodological tool in thinking about the narratives of Secord. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. (London and New York, 1991). See also Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. (New York, 1983). Like Anderson’s work, however, this collection does not address the complex relationships of gender, nationalism, and the “invented traditions” it analyses.
  3. Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867-1914* (Toronto, 1970), 78.
  4. Catherine Hall, Jane Lewis, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, “Introduction,” *Gender and History: Special Issue on Gender, Nationalisms, and National Identities* 5: 2 (Summer 1993): 159-164. 159.
  5. Recent work by historians of Indian nationalism explores the use of female images, particularly that of the nation as mother. See, for example, Samita Sen, “Motherhood and Mother craft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal,” *Gender and History: Special Issue on Gender, Nationalisms and National Identities*, 231-243. See also the essays in *History Workshop Journal. Special Issue: Colonial and Post-Colonial History* 36 (Autumn 1993) and Mrinalini Sinha, “Reading *Mother India*: Empire, Nation, and the Female Voice,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6:2 (Summer 1994): 6-44.

about Secord's walk, we can further our understanding of the links between gender, race, and imperialism in late nineteenth-century Canadian nationalism and feminism.<sup>6</sup>

Secord became part of the narratives of Loyalist self-sacrifice and duty to country and Crown primarily — although not solely — because of the attempts of women historians and writers who, from the 1880s on, strove to incorporate women into Canadian history and to dislodge the masculine emphasis of the nineteenth-century Loyalist myths of suffering and sacrifice. Women such as Sarah Curzon, the feminist writer, historian, and temperance advocate, insisted that white Canadian women, past and present, had something of value to offer the nation and empire and that their contribution as women to the record of Canadian history be acknowledged and valued. Secord, she (and others like her) argued, was not outside the narrative of Canadian history and she (and other women) therefore had a place in shaping the “imagined communities” of Canadian nationalist and imperialist discourse. Unlike that of other, potentially unruly and disruptive women in Canadian history, Laura Secord's image could be more easily domesticated to accord with late-Victorian notions of white, middle-class femininity.<sup>7</sup> It could also be moulded by feminists to argue for a greater recognition of the importance of such femininity to Canadian society. Moreover, Laura Secord was not an isolated figure. Ranged behind and about her was a whole gallery of women in Canadian history, from Madeleine de Verchères of New France to the anonymous, archetypal pioneer woman of the backwoods of Upper Canada; women, these “amateur” historians insisted, who were historical figures as worthy of study as their male contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

Before discussing the writing of Laura Secord into Loyalist history, however, it is crucial to outline the gendered nature of the nineteenth-century narratives of the War of 1812. Historians who have studied Upper Canadian politics have duly noted that assertions of loyalty and sacrifice during the war became the basis for many claims on the Upper Canadian state, in the competition for land and patronage appointments and for compensation for war losses.<sup>9</sup> Donald Akenson, for example, has pointed to the way in which claims to loyal duty during the war were used in attempts to justify the access of some residents to certain material benefits. Such claims were also made to legitimate

---

6. One of the few Canadian historians to point to these connections has been George Ingram, in “The Story of Laura Secord Revisited,” *Ontario History* LVII: 2 (June 1965): 85-97. Other works tackling these questions have looked at such areas as social reform. See Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945* (Toronto, 1990) and Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada 1885-1925* (Toronto, 1991).

7. For a heroine who was not so easily domesticated, see Colin M. Coates, “Commemorating the Woman Warrior of New France: Madeleine de Verchères, 1696-1930,” Paper presented to the 72nd Annual Conference of the Canadian Historical Association, Ottawa, June 1993; also Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (London, 1981).

8. See, for example, the *Transactions* of both the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa and those of the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto, from the 1890s to the 1920s.

9. David Mills, *The Idea of Loyalty in Upper Canada, 1784-1850* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988).

the exclusion of others from such rewards.<sup>10</sup> Yet what has not been included in these historians' analysis of sacrifice in the war as a bargaining chip in the struggle for material gains in Upper Canada, is the gendered nature of the narratives that were used. In Upper Canadians' commemorations of the War of 1812, the important sacrifices for Country and monarch were made by Upper Canadian men, frequently in their capacity as members of the militia who risked life and limb to protect women and children, homes and hearths, from the brutal rampages of hordes of blood-thirsty Americans. During the war, and in its aftermath, women's contributions to the defence of the colony were either downplayed or ignored, in favour of the image of the helpless Upper Canadian wife and mother who entrusted her own and her children's safety to the gallant militia and British troops.<sup>11</sup>

Personifying the whole, of course, was the masculine figure of Isaac Brock, the British commander who made the ultimate sacrifice for the colony when he died at the Battle of Queenston Heights in 1812. Brock provided those who shaped the history of the war with a dualistic image of nationalism, one that managed to celebrate both Upper Canadian identity and colonial loyalty to Britain. He was also a Christ-like figure, a man who had given both his troops and the colony beneficent paternal guidance and wisdom but who had not spared himself from the physical dangers of war — physical dangers that really only threatened men in the military. Those who contributed to the glorification of Brock claimed that he had provided an invaluable means whereby the colonists might resist the enemy's encroachments. Brock had inspired Upper Canadian men, who might emulate his deed of manly patriotism, and he had reassured Upper Canadian women that, come what may, they could look to their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers for protection.<sup>12</sup>

This kind of narrative, which emphasized masculine suffering, sacrifice, and achievements, was not unique to that of the War of 1812. As Janice Potter-MacKinnon argues, the history of Upper Canadian Loyalism focussed on male military service and the political identification of male Loyalists with the British crown and constitution

Well into the twentieth century, loyalty was a male concept in that it was associated with political decision-making — a sphere from which women were excluded. The same can be said of the idea that the Loyalists bequeathed conservative values and British institutions to later generations of Canadians: women have had no role in fashioning

- 
10. Donald H. Ankenon, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montreal and Kingston, 1984), 134.
  11. See Cecilia Morgan, "Languages of Gender in Upper Canadian Politics and Religion, 179-1850" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1993), Chapter II. It is interesting that, while the militia myth has been challenged by many historians, its gendered nature has received very little attention. See, for example, the most recent study of the War of 1812, George Sheppard's *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994).
  12. Morgan, 56-60; see also Keith Walden, "Isaac Brock: Man and Myth: A Study of the militia myth of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada 1812-1912" (M.A. Thesis, Queen's University, 1971).

political values and institutions. The notion that the Loyalists were the founders of a nation had obvious and unequivocal gender implications. the amateur historian William Caniff was right when he equated the “founders” with the “fathers.”<sup>13</sup>

Admittedly there was no automatic and essential connection between military activities and masculinity in Canadian history for, as Colin Coates has pointed out, the woman warrior tradition was not unknown to nineteenth-century Canada.<sup>14</sup> But specific female images (or images of femininity in general) as symbols of loyalty and patriotism in Upper Canada are almost completely lacking in the discourses of the period, and they display a general reluctance to admit that women could have contributed to the war effort as civilians.<sup>15</sup> This silence about women and the feminine — except as helpless victims to which the masculine bravery of Upper Canadian men was inextricably linked — was quite the opposite of the discourses of the French Revolution, with their glorification of Marianne; the American Patriot’s figure of the republican mother; or even the more conservative use of the British figure of Britannia.<sup>16</sup>

The earliest efforts to call attention to Secord’s contribution to the war were made by her husband James, by her son, and by Laura herself. In a petition written February 25, 1820 and addressed to Lieutenant-Governor Sir Peregrine Maitland, James Secord requested a licence to quarry stone in the Queenston military reserve. After mentioning his own wartime service — he had served as a captain in the militia — his wounds, and the plundering of his home by American troops, Secord claimed that “his wife embraced an opportunity of rendering some service, at the risk of her own life, in going thru the Enemies’ Lines to communicate information to a Detachment of His Majesty’s Troops at the Beaver Dam in the month of June 1813.”<sup>17</sup> A second, similar petition was turned down in 1827 but Maitland did propose that Laura apply for the job of looking after Brock’s monument. It is not clear whether Maitland was aware of the gendered and nationalist symbolism of a Canadian woman care-taking the memory of a British general; he did, however, have “a favorable opinion of the character and claims of Mr. Secord and his wife.”<sup>18</sup> However, Maitland’s successor, Sir John Colborne, was apparently not

---

13. Janice Potter-Mackinnon, *While the Women Only Wept: Loyalist Refugee Women in Eastern Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993), 158.

14. Coates, “Commemorating the Heroine of New France.”

15. Morgan, chap II

16. On the French Revolution, see Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle; Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880* (Trans. by Janet Lloyd. Cambridge, 1981). For republican motherhood, see Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Female Political Imagination in the Early Republic,” in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); for Britannia, see Madge Dresser, “Britannia,” in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism, the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*. Volume III: *National Fictions* (London, 1989), 26-49.

17. The petition is reprinted in Ruth McKenzie’s *Laura Secord: the legend and the lady* (Toronto, 1971), 74-5. To date, McKenzie’s book is the most thorough and best researched popular account of the development of the Secord legend.

18. *Ibid.*, 76.

as well-disposed toward the family and the job went to Theresa Nichol, the widow of militia Colonel Robert Nichol.<sup>19</sup>

When James died in 1841, Laura submitted two petitions to Governor Sydenham: one that asked that her son be given his father's post as customs' collector and another that asked for a pension. Both cited her poverty, her lack of support since her husband's death, and her need to support her daughters and grandchildren. While her petitions used the language of female dependency noted by Potter-MacKinnon in Loyalist women's submissions, they also featured her service to her country in 1813 and her new position as the head of a household.<sup>20</sup> Her son Charles' article, published in an 1845 edition of the Anglican paper, *The Church*, publicised her walk, calling attention to his mother's service to her country and the British Crown.<sup>21</sup> Eight years later Laura Secord wrote her own account of her trek to warn the British Lieutenant James Fitzgibbon, in a piece that appeared in the *Anglo American Magazine* as part of a larger narrative of the war. While this article would be used and cited by others from the 1880s on, it was written in a straightforward manner, with few of the rhetorical flourishes or personal details that would characterize later accounts. And, while Secord concluded her story with the observation that she now wondered "how I could have gone through so much fatigue, with the fortitude to accomplish it," she did not stress her need to overcome physical frailty in reaching Fitzgibbon.<sup>22</sup>

Secord achieved some success in her campaign for some financial recognition on the part of the state in 1860, when she presented her story to the Prince of Wales during his tour of British North America. She was also the only woman whose name appeared on an address presented by the surviving veterans of the Battle of Queenston Heights to the Prince, in a ceremony attended by five hundred visitors and at which a memorial stone was laid on the site where Brock fell. Her "patriotic services," claimed the *Niagara Mail* in 1861, were "handsomely rewarded" by the Prince with an award of £100.<sup>23</sup> One of her more recent biographies argues that the prince "provided the magic touch that transformed the 'widow of the late James Secord' into the heroine, Laura Secord."<sup>24</sup>

However, Secord did not become a heroine overnight. Her own efforts to draw attention to the service she had rendered to her country should not be seen as attempts to create a cult for herself, but rather as part of the Upper Canadian patronage game, in which loyal service to crown and country was the way to obtain material rewards.<sup>25</sup>

---

19. Ibid, 76-7; also Sheppard, 221.

20. McKenzie, 84-5.

21. Ibid, 49ff.

22. Ibid, 91-92; also in Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* (New York, 1869), 621.

23. McKenzie, 102.

24. Ibid, 103-4.

25. For an analysis of patronage in nineteenth-century Ontario, see S. J. R. Noel, *Patrons, Clients Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics 1791-1896* (Toronto, 1990).



Furthermore, she died in 1868, almost twenty years before her popularity began to spread. Still, references to Secord had begun to appear in a few mid-nineteenth-century accounts of the War of 1812. For example, the American historian Benson J. Lossing's *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* devoted a page to Secord and the Battle of Beaver Dams. The page's caption read "British Troops saved by a Heroine," and Laura's own written account was the voice that supplied Lossing with his information.<sup>26</sup> The Canadian historian and government official, William F. Coffin, elaborated on her story by adding the cow — which, he claimed, she had milked in order to convince the American sentry to let her pass. While some regard Coffin's account as yet another example of a romantically-inclined nineteenth century historian playing fast and loose with the facts, his placing of Secord in a context of pioneer domesticity foreshadowed subsequent stories appearing two decades later.<sup>27</sup> Secord thus was not rescued from complete obscurity by Curzon and others in the 1880s and '90s; she was, however, given a much more prominent place in their narratives of the war and Upper Canadian loyalty.

Sarah A. Curzon has become known in Canadian women's history as a British-born suffrage activist and a founding member of the Toronto Women's Literary Society (which would later become the Canadian Woman's Suffrage Association) and the editor of a women's page in the prohibition paper, the *Canada Citizen*. But she was also an avid promoter of Canadian history and was one of the co-founders of the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto (WCHS) in 1885, along with Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon, a grand-daughter of Lieutenant James Fitzgibbon. Furthermore, Curzon and Fitzgibbon were supporters of Canada's "imperial connection" to Britain, a link which they believed would benefit Canada both economically and culturally.<sup>28</sup> Emma Currie was another major contributor to the campaign to memorialize Secord. Indeed, her book, *The Story of Laura Secord and Canadian Reminiscences*, was published in 1900 as a fund-raiser for a monument to the "heroine" of Upper Canada. Currie lived in St. Catharines, helped found the Woman's Literary Club in that city in 1892, and would later join the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE). She too was a supporter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and women's suffrage.<sup>29</sup>

---

26. Lossing, 621.

27. William F. Coffin, *1812: the War, and its Moral: a Canadian Chronicle* (Montreal, 1864), 148.

28. See Sarah A. Curzon, *Laura Secord, the Heroine of 1812: a Drama and Other Poems* (Toronto, 1887). For biographical sketches of Curzon and Fitzgibbon, see Henry James Morgan, *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time; A Hand-Book of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, 1898 and 1912), 235-6 and 400. Curzon's work is briefly discussed in Carol Bacchi's *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto, 1981), 26-7 and 44, but Bacchi's frame of reference does not take in Curzon's (or other suffragists') interest in history as an important cultural aspect of their maternal feminism and imperialism.

29. Morgan, 1912, 288-289; see also Mrs. G. M. Armstrong, *The First Eighty Years of the Women's Literary Club of St. Catharines, 1892-1972* (n.p., 1972); Emma A. Currie, *The story of Laura Secord and Canadian Reminiscences* (St. Catharines, 1913).

But these women were not alone in their crusade to win recognition for Secord. Other Canadian nationalist writers like Charles Mair, Agnes Maule Machar, and William Kirby, praised Secord's bravery in their poetry and prose,<sup>30</sup> while local historical societies and those who purported to be "national" historians, such as Ernest Cruikshank, also published papers that focussed on the Battle of Beaver Dams and acknowledged Secord's role in it.<sup>31</sup> Much of their work, as well as that of Curzon and Currie, was part of late-Victorian Canadian imperialist discourse, which perceived the past as the repository of those principles (loyalty to Britain, respect for law and order, and the capacity for democratic government) that would guide the nation into the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> As Berger has argued, the local history societies that spread in the 1880s and 1890s were part of this "conservative frame of mind" in which loyalism, nationalism, and history were inextricably linked.<sup>33</sup>

Tributes in ink comprised the bulk of this material but they were not the only efforts to memorialize Secord. As Currie's book indicates, printed material might be used to raise funds and spread awareness in order to create more long-lasting, substantive reminders, such as monuments and statues. On June 6, 1887, W. Fenwick, a grammar school principal in Drummondville, wrote to the *Toronto World and Mail* asking for better care for the Lundy's Lane graveyard, a national monument to be erected to honour those who had died there, and a separate monument to Laura Secord. Curzon joined in a letter-writing campaign, calling for the women of Canada to take up the matter, and petitions were presented to the Ontario Legislature. When these were unsuccessful, the Lundy's Lane and Ontario Historical Societies mounted fund raising drives for the monument, sending out circulars asking Canadian women and children to contribute 10¢ and 1¢ respectively to the cause.<sup>34</sup> A competition for the sculpture was held and won by a Miss Mildred Peel, an artist and sculptor who also would paint the portrait of Secord

---

30. Charles Mair, "A Ballad for Brave Women," in *Tecumseh: a Drama and Canadian Poems* (Toronto, 1901), 147; William Kirby, *Annals of Niagara*, ed. and intro. by Lorne Pierce (Toronto, 1927. first ed. 1896), 209-10. Kirby had been Currie's childhood tutor in Niagara and both she and Curzon continued to look to him for advice, support, and recognition (Archives of Ontario [AO]), MS 542, William Kirby Correspondence, Reel 1, Curzon and Currie to Kirby, 1887-1906). Kirby and Mair were made honorary members of the WCHS (AO, MU 7837-7838, Series A, WCHS papers, Correspondence File 1, William Kirby to Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon, April 11, 1896, Charles Mair to Fitzgibbon, May 8, 1896). For Machar, see "Laura Secord," in her *Lays of the True North and Other Poems* (Toronto, 1887), 35. See also Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Moral Nationalism in Victorian Canada: The Case of Agnes Machar," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 20: 1 (Spring 1985): 90-108.

31. See, for example, "The Heroine of the Beaver Dams," *Canadian Antiquarian and Numismatic Journal* VIII (Montreal, 1879): 135-6. Many thanks to Colin Coates for this reference. See also Ernest Cruikshank, *The Fight in the Beechwoods* (Lundy's Lane Historical Society: Drummondville, 1889), 1, 13-14, 19.

32. Berger, 89-90.

33. *Ibid.*, 95-6.

34. Janet Carnochan, "Laura Secord Monument at Lundy's Lane," *Transactions of the Niagara Historical Society* (Niagara, 1913), 11-18,

hung in 1905 in the Ontario legislature.<sup>35</sup> After fourteen years of campaigning, the monument was unveiled June 22, 1901 at Lundy's Lane. In 1911, the Women's Institute of Queenston and St. David's felt that the village of Queenston (site of the Second home during the War of 1812) had not done enough to honour Secord's memory and built a Memorial Hall as part of Laura Secord school. The gesture that enshrined her name in popular culture came in 1913, when Frank O'Connor chose Secord as the emblem for his new chain of candy stores.<sup>36</sup>

While it was not suggested that celebrating Secord's contribution was the sole responsibility of Canadian womanhood, many aspects of this campaign were shaped by deeply gendered notions and assumptions about both past and present. The idea that women might have a special interest in supporting the subscription drive, for example, or petitioning the legislature, linked perceptions of both womanhood and nationalism, drawing upon the underlying assumptions of self-sacrifice and unselfishness that lay at the heart of both identities.<sup>37</sup> Groups such as the WCHS, with their "unselfish patriotism," were exactly what the country needed, Kirby told Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon upon being made an honorary member of the society, adding "let the women be right and the country will be might!"<sup>38</sup> Moreover, while male writers and historians certainly expressed an interest in Secord, it is important not to overlook the significance of the participation of Anglo-Celtic, middle- and upper middle class women in the writing of Canadian history, a task they frequently undertook as members of local historical societies. Such women scrutinized historical records in order to find their fore mothers (in both the literal and metaphorical sense).<sup>39</sup> However, they also were fascinated with the entire "pioneer" period of Canadian history, both French and English, and with both male and female figures in this context. For the most part, women members of historical societies

---

35. Carnochan, 13.

36. McKenzie, 118-9.

37. Marilyn Lake has made a similar argument about Australian nationalist discourse during World War One. See her, "Mission Impossible: How Men Gave Birth to the Australian Nation - Nationalism, Gender and Other Seminal Acts," *Gender and History. Special Issue on Motherhood, Race and the State in the Twentieth Century* 4:3 (Autumn 1992): 305-322, particularly 307. For the theme of self-sacrifice in Canadian nationalism, see Berger, 217. The links between the discourses of late-Victorian, white, bourgeois femininity and that of Canadian racial policy have been explored by Valverde in *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, in the contexts of moral reform, the white slavery panic, and immigration policies. See also Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*, ch 7. For gender and imperialism in the British and American contexts, see Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London and New York, 1992). The seminal article on imperialism and British womanhood is Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood," *History Workshop Journal* 5 (Spring 1978): 9-65.

38. WCHS papers, MU 7837-7838, Series A, Correspondence File 1, Kirby to Fitzgibbon, April 14, 1896.

39. See, for example, Mrs. J. R. Hill, "Early British Canadian Heroines," *Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa Transactions*, 10 (1928): 93-8; Harriet Prudis, "Reminiscences of Mrs. Gilbert Ponte," *London and Middlesex Historical Society Transactions* (1902, pub. 1907): 62-4.

researched and presented papers on as many generals and male explorers as they did “heroines.”<sup>40</sup>

There was, however, a difference in their treatment of the latter. They insisted that Canadian women’s contributions to nation-building be valued, even though they had not achieved the fame and recognition of their male counterparts. To be sure, they did not offer alternative narratives of early Canadian history and tended to place political and military developments at its centre. Nevertheless, they sought to widen the parameters of male historians’ definitions of these events in order to demonstrate their far-reaching effects on all Canadian society. In the meetings of organizations such as Canadian Women’s Historical Societies of Toronto and Ottawa, papers were given on topics such as “Early British Canadian Heroines” or “Reminiscences” of pioneer women.<sup>41</sup> Women such as Harriet Prudis, who was active in the London and Middlesex Historical Society during this period, believed that while the history of the pioneer women of the London area

records no daring deed . . . nor historic tramp, like that of Laura Secord, yet every life is a record of such patient endurance of privations, such brave battling with danger, such a wonderful gift for resourceful adaptability, that the simplest story of the old days must bear, within itself, the sterling elements of romance. While they took no part in the national or political happenings of the day, it may be interesting to us, and to those who come after us, to hear from their own lips how these public events affected their simple lives.<sup>42</sup>

Their efforts were shared by male novelists and historians who not only glorified Secord but also wished to rescue other Canadian women of her era and ilk from obscurity.<sup>43</sup> However, as more than one honorary member of the WCHS told Fitzgibbon, Canadian women should have a special desire to preserve records of their past. According to Mair, “the sacred domestic instincts of Canadian womanhood will not suffer in the least degree, but will rather be refreshed and strengthened” by the Society’s “rescuing from destruction the scattered and perishable records of Ontario’s old, and, in many respects, romantic home life.”<sup>44</sup> The collection of material concerning this latter area, Mair and others felt, should be the special work of Canadian women.<sup>45</sup>

---

40. Harriet Prudis, “The 100th Regiment,” *L & MHS Transactions*, V (1912-1913), n.p.; Agnes Dunbar Chamberlin, “The Colored Citizens of Toronto,” *WCHS of Toronto Transactions*, 8 (1908): 9-15; also the biography of Brock by Lady Edgar, one of the first presidents of the WCHS [*Life of General Brock* (Toronto, 1904)].

41. See note 37 above

42. Prudis, 62.

43. See Ernest Green, “Some Canadian Women of 1812-14,” *WCHS of Ottawa Transactions* 9 (1925): 98-109.

44. WCHS papers, MU 7837-7838, Series A, Correspondence File 1, Mair to Fitzgibbon, May 8, 1896,

45. *Ibid*; see also WCHS papers, MU 7837-7838, Series A, Correspondence File 1, John H. to Fitzgibbon, May 6, 1896.

The extent to which this relegation of the “social” realm to women historians set a precedent for future developments, whereby “romantic home life” was perceived as both the preserve of women and the realm of the trivial and anecdotal, is not entirely clear.<sup>46</sup> Certainly it does not appear to have been Mair’s intention that these areas be perceived as trivial or unworthy of male historians’ attention, while women such as Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon were as eager to research battles and collect military memorabilia as they were concerned with “primitive clothing, food cookery, amusements, and observances of festivals attending births and wedlock or the Charivari.”<sup>47</sup> Yet it was probably no coincidence that the first historian to seriously challenge the military value of Secord’s walk was the male academic W. S. Wallace, who in 1930 raised a furor amongst public supporters of Secord with questions concerning the use of historical evidence in documenting her walk.<sup>48</sup>

This, then, was the context in which Laura Secord became an increasingly popular symbol of Canadian patriotism: one of feminism, history, patriotism, and imperialism. While many of these histories were, as Berger has pointed out, local and might seem incredibly parochial in their scope, their authors saw locally-based stories as having a much wider emotional and moral significance in the narratives of the nation.<sup>49</sup> Hence, narratives of Secord’s contribution to the War of 1812 and to the colonial link with the British Empire were marked by the interplay of locality, nationality, and gender. First, Laura and James Secord’s backgrounds were explored and their genealogies traced, in order to place them within the Loyalist tradition of suffering and sacrifice. For those writers who were concerned with strict historical accuracy, such a task was considerably easier for the Secords than for Laura’s family, the Ingersolls. James’ male ancestors had fought in the Revolutionary war for the British crown and the many military ranks occupied by the Secord men were duly listed and acclaimed. Moreover, the Secords could claim a history of both allegiance to the British Crown and a desire for the protection of the British constitution; they were descended from Huguenots who arrived in New York from LaRochelle in the late seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup>

---

46. As Linda Kerber argues, it was precisely this relegation that women’s historians of the 1960s and ’70s had to confront in their attempts to lift women’s lives from the “realm of the trivial and anecdotal” See her “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75: 1 (June 1988): 9-39, especially 37.

47. Mair to Fitzgibbon, May 8, 1896 .

48. W.S. Wallace, *The story of Laura Secord* (Toronto, 1932). For a response to Wallace, see “What Laura Secord Did,” *Dunnville Weekly Chronicle*, 35 (1932), reprinted from Toronto *Saturday Night*, June 22, 1932.

49. Berger, 96. As M. Brook Taylor has pointed out about the work of nineteenth century writers such as John Charles Dent, Francis Hincks, and Charles Lindsey, “National historians were essentially Upper Canadian historians in masquerade.” See his *Promoters Patriots, and Partisans: Historiography in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 1989), 231.

50. Currie, 21-33.

But it was not only the Secord men that had served their country and suffered hardships. The loyalist legacy inherited by both Laura and James had, it was pointed out, been marked by gender differences. As Curzon told her audiences, James Secord's arrival in Canada had been as a three-year-old refugee, part of his mother's "flight through the wilderness, with four other homeless women and many children, to escape the fury of a band of ruffians who called themselves the "sons of Liberty." After enduring frightful hardships for nearly a month, they finally arrived at Fort Niagara almost naked and starving." Curzon went on to comment that these were by no means "uncommon experiences." Frequently, she pointed out, Loyalist men had to flee "for their lives" and leave their women and children behind (as well as their "goods, chattels, estates, and money"). Their loved ones were then left to endure the terrors of the wilderness:

unprotected and unsupported, save by that deep faith in God and love to King and country which, with their personal devotion to their husbands, made of them heroines whose story of unparalleled devotion, hardships patiently borne, motherhood honourably sustained, industry and thrift perseveringly followed, enterprise successfully prosecuted, principle unwaveringly upheld, and tenderness never surpassed, has yet to be written, and whose share in the making of this nation remains to be equally honored with that of the men who bled and fought for its liberties.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately for Laura's popularizers, the Ingersoll family did not fit as neatly into the Loyalist tradition. Her father, Thomas, had fought against the British in 1776 and had seen his 1793 land grant cancelled as a result of British efforts to curb large-scale immigration of American settlers into Upper Canada.<sup>52</sup> As J.H. Ingersoll observed in 1926, Laura's inability to claim the United Empire Loyalist pedigree "has been commented upon." However, some historians argued that Thomas Ingersoll came to Upper Canada at Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe's request.<sup>53</sup> For those poets and novelists who felt free to create Laura's loyalism in a more imaginative manner, her patriotism was traced to a long-standing childhood attachment to Britain. They insisted that she

- 
51. Curzon, *The story of Laura Secord, 1813* (Lundy's Lane Historical Society, July 25, 1891). 6-7.
52. See Gerald M. Craig, *Upper Canada: the Formative Years 1784-1841* (Toronto, 1963), 49, for a discussion of this shift in policy. McKenzie also argues that Ingersoll did not fulfill his settlement obligations (29). See also Currie, 38-9.
53. J. H. Ingersoll, "The Ancestry of Laura Secord," *Ontario Historical Society* (1926): 361-3. See also Elizabeth Thompson, "Laura Ingersoll Secord," 1. Others argued that Ingersoll was urged by Joseph Brant to come to Upper Canada (Ingersoll, 363). The Brant connection was developed most fully and romantically by John Price-Brown in *Laura the Undaunted: A Canadian Historical Romance* (Toronto, 1930). It has also been pointed out that Price-Brown picked up the story, "invented out of whole cloth" by Curzon, that Tecumseh had fallen in love with one of Secord's daughters. See Dennis Duffy, *Gardens, Covenants, Exiles: Loyalism in the Literature of Upper Canada/Ontario* (Toronto, 1982), 61. In Price-Brown's account, Tecumseh proposes just before he is killed; Laura, however, disapproves of the match (259-269).

chose Canada freely and was not forced to come to the country as a refugee.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, despite these historians' fascination with lines of blood and birth, they were equally determined to demonstrate that the former could be transcended by environment and force of personality. The loyal society of Upper Canada and the strength of Laura's own commitment to Britain were important reminders to the Canadian public that a sense of imperial duty could overcome other relationships and flourish in the colonial context.<sup>55</sup>

Accordingly, these historians argued, it should come as no surprise that both Laura and her husband felt obliged to perform their patriotic duty when American officers were overheard planning an attack on the British forces of Lieutenant Fitzgibbon.<sup>56</sup> However, James was still suffering from wounds sustained at the Battle of Queenston Heights and it therefore fell to Laura — over her husband's objections and concern for her safety — to walk the twenty miles from Queenston to warn the British troops at Beaver Dams. (Here the linear chronology of the narratives was frequently interrupted to explain out that Laura had come to his aid after the battle when, finding him badly wounded and in danger of being beaten to death by "common" American soldiers, she had attempted to shield him with her own body from their rifle butts — further evidence that Laura was no stranger to wifely and patriotic duty.<sup>57</sup>)

Laura's journey took on wider dimensions and greater significance in the hands of her commemorators. It was no longer just a walk to warn the British but, with its elements of venturing into the unknown, physical sacrifice, and devotion to the British values of order and democracy, came to symbolize the entire "pioneer womanish experience in Canadian history.<sup>58</sup> Leaving the cozy domesticity and safety of her home, the company of her wounded husband and children, Secord had ventured out into the Upper Canadian wilderness with its swamps and underbrush in which threatening creatures, such as rattlesnakes, bears, and wolves, might lurk.<sup>59</sup> And even when Sarah Curzon's 1887 play

---

54. Price-Brown, 16-17, 180-182.

55. Just as French-Canadians could overcome other ties (see Berger, 138-9).

56. Thompson, 2; Currie, 48; Ingersoll, 362.

57. Price-Brown's "fictional" account is the most colourful, since one of the American officers who did not intervene to save the Secords was a former suitor of Laura's, whom she had rejected in favour of James and Canada (252-5). See also Currie, 53-4.

58. Norman Knowles, in his study of late-nineteenth-century Ontario commemorations of Loyalism, argues that pioneer and rural myths subsumed those of Loyalism ("Inventing the Loyalists: the Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of a Usable Past, 1784-1924," Ph.D. thesis, York University 1990). To date, my research on women commemorators indicates that, for them, both Loyalism (particularly people, places, and artifacts having to do with 1812) and the "pioneer past" were closely intertwined; both were of great significance and inspirational power in their interpretations of the past. See Elizabeth Thompson, *The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991) for a study of this archetype in the fiction of Canadian authors Catherine Parr Trail, Sara Jeanette Duncan, Ralph Connor, and Margaret Laurence.

59. The most extensive description is in Curzon's *The Story of Laura Secord*, 11-12.

permitted Laura to deliver several monologues on the loveliness of the June woodland, the tranquility of the forest was disrupted by the howling of wolves.<sup>60</sup>

But most serious of all, in the majority of accounts, was the threat of the “Indians” she might meet on the way. If Secord’s commitment to Canada and Britain had previously been presented in cultural terms, ones that could be encouraged by the colonial tie and that might transcend race, it was at this point that her significance as a symbol of white Canadian womanhood was clearest. While her feminine fragility had been the subject of comment throughout the stories, and while her racial background might have been the underlying sub-text for this fragility, it was in the discussions of the threat of native warriors that her gender became most clearly racialized.<sup>61</sup> Unlike the contemporary racist and cultural stereotypes of threatening black male sexuality used in American lynching campaigns, however, her fears were not of sexual violence by native men — at least not explicitly — but of the tactics supposedly used by native men in warfare, scalping being the most obvious.<sup>62</sup>

To be sure, some stories mentioned that Secord had had to stay clear of open roads and paths “for fear of Indians *and* white marauders” (emphasis mine).<sup>63</sup> But even those who downplayed her fear of a chance encounter with an “Indian” during her journey were scrupulous in their description of her fright upon encountering Mohawks outside the British camp. Secord herself had stated that she had stumbled across the Mohawks’ camp and that they had shouted “woman” at her, making her “tremble” and giving her an “awful feeling.” It was only with difficulty, she said, that she convinced them to take her to Fitzgibbon.<sup>64</sup> As this meeting with the natives was retold, they became more menacing and inspired even greater fear in Secord. In these accounts, at this penultimate stage in her journey she stepped on a twig that snapped and startled an Indian encampment. Quite suddenly Secord was surrounded by them, “the chief throws up his tomahawk to strike, regarding the intruder as a spy.”<sup>65</sup> In some narratives, he shouted at

---

60. Curzon, *Laura Secord: The Heroine of the War of 1812*, 39-47.

61. While examining a very different period and genre of writing, I have found Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “Captured Subjects/Savage others; Violently Engendering the new American” to be extremely helpful in understanding the construction of white womanhood in the North American context. See *Gender and History* 5: 2 (Summer 1993), 177-195. See also Vron Ware, “Moments of Danger: Race, Gender, and memories of Empire,” *History and Theory* Beiheft (1992): 116-137

62. See Ware, “To Make the Facts Known,” in *Beyond the Pale* for a discussion of lynching and the feminist campaign against it. Smith-Rosenberg points to a similar treatment of native men in Mary Rowlandson’s seventeenth-century captivity narrative (183-4). While the two examples should not be conflated, this issue does call for further analysis.

63. Cruikshank, 13.

64. Secord in Thompson, 4-5.

65. See, for example, Blanche Hume, *Laura Secord* (Toronto, 1928), 1. This book was part of a Ryerson Canadian History Readers series, endorsed by the IODE and the Provincial Department of Education.



her “woman! what does woman want!” Only her courage in springing to his arm is the woman saved, and an opportunity snatched to assure him of her loyalty.”<sup>66</sup>

Moved by pity and admiration, the chief gave her a guide, and at length she reached Fitzgibbon, delivered and verified her message - “and *faints*.”<sup>67</sup> Fitzgibbon then went off to fight the Battle of Beaver Dams, armed with the knowledge that Secord had brought him and managed to successfully rout the American forces. In a number of narratives, this victory was frequently achieved by using the threat of unleashed Indian savagery when the Americans were reluctant to surrender.<sup>68</sup> While the battle was being fought, Secord was moved to a nearby house, where she slept off her walk, and then returned to the safety of her home and family. She told her family about her achievement but, motivated by fear for their security (as American troops continued to occupy the Niagara area) as well as by her own modesty and self-denial, she did not look for any recognition or reward. Such honours came first to Fitzgibbon.<sup>69</sup>

Women such as Curzon and Currie might see Secord’s contribution as natural and unsurprising (given her devotion to her country) but they also were keenly aware that their mission of commemoration necessitated that their work appeal to a popular audience. These narratives were imbued with their authors’ concerns with the relations of gender, class, and race and the way in which they perceived these identities to structure both Canadian society and history. For one, Secord’s “natural” feminine fragility was a major theme of their writings. As a white woman of good birth and descent she was not physically suited to undertake the hardships involved in her walk (although, paradoxically, as a typical “pioneer woman” she was able to undertake the hardships of raising a family and looking after a household in a recently-settled area). Her delicacy and slight build, first mentioned by Fitzgibbon in his own testimony of her walk, was frequently stressed by those who commemorated her.<sup>70</sup> Her physical frailty could be contrasted with the manly size and strength of soldiers such as Fitzgibbon and Brock.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the seeming physical immutability of gender was not an insurmountable barrier to her patriotic duty to country and empire. The claims of the latter transcended corporeal limitations. Even her maternal duties, understood by both conservatives and many feminists in late-nineteenth-century Canada to be the core of womanly identity,

---

66. Ibid, 15.

67. Curzon, *The Story of Laura Secord*, 13.

68. See, for example, Cruikshank, 18.

69. Currie, 52-3. Fitzgibbon supposedly took full credit for the victory, ignoring both Secord’s and the Caughnawaga Mohawks’ roles (McKenzie, 66-7). He later became a colonel in the York militia and was rewarded for his role in putting down the 1837 rebellion with a £1000 grant (89-90).

70. Fitzgibbon in Thompson, 6.

71. Hume, 4.

could be put aside or even reformulated in order to answer her country's needs.<sup>72</sup> While her supporters did not make explicit their motives in stressing her frailty, it is possible to see it as a sub-text to counter medical and scientific arguments about female physical deficiencies that made women, particularly white, middle-class women, unfit for political participation and higher education.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, there were other ways to make Secord both appealing and a reflection of their own conceptions of "Canadian womanhood," and many historians treated her as an icon of respectable white heterosexual femininity. Anecdotes supposedly told by her family were often added to the end of the narratives of her walk — especially those written by women — and these emphasized her love of children, her kindness and charity towards the elderly, and her very feminine love of finery and gaiety (making her daughters' satin slippers, for example, and her participation as a young woman in balls given by the Secords at Newark.) Indeed, they went so far as to discuss the clothing that she wore on her walk. Her daughter Harriet told Currie that she and her sisters saw their mother leave that morning wearing "a flowered print gown, I think it was brown with orange flowers, at least a yellow tint . . ." <sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, who was active within the Ontario Historical Society and was also a member of the IODE, also wrote that Secord wore a print dress, adding a "cottage bonnet tied under her chin . . . balbriggan stockings, with red silk clocks on the sides, and low shoes with buckles" — both of which were lost during the walk.<sup>75</sup>

For her most active supporters, the walk of Laura Secord meant that certain women could be written into the record of loyalty and patriotic duty in Canadian history, and female heroines could gain recognition for the deeds they had committed. In the eyes of these historians, such recognition had heretofore been withheld simply because of these figures' gender, for in every other significant feature — their racial and ethnic identities, for example — they were no different than their male counterparts. But such additions to the narrative were intended to be just that: additions, not serious disruptions of the story's focus on the ultimate triumph of British institutions and the imperial tie in Canada. Like her walk, Secord herself was constructed in many ways as the archetypical "British" pioneer woman of Loyalist history, remembered for her willingness to struggle, sacrifice, and thus contribute to "nation-building." These historians also suggested that patriotic duties and loyalty to the state did not automatically constitute a major threat to late-nineteenth century concepts of masculinity and femininity. Secord could undertake such duties, but still had to be defined by her relations to husband and children, home

---

72. For example, in Curzon's play Secord is asked by her sister-in-law, the Widow Secord, if her children will not "blame" her should she come to harm. She replies that "children can see the right at one quick glance," suggesting that their mother's maternal care and authority is bound to her patriotism and loyalty (34).

73. See Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies: Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto, 1991), especially "The Frailty of Women."

74. Currie, 71.

75. Thompson, 3. Balbriggan was a type of fine, unbleached, knitted cotton hosiery material.

and family. She did not, it was clear, take up arms herself, nor did she use her contribution to win recognition for her own gain.

In the context of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century debates about gender relations in Canadian society, Secord was a persuasive symbol of how certain women might breach the division between “private” and “public,” the family and the state, and do so for entirely unselfish and patriotic reasons. The narratives of Laura Secord’s walk helped shape an image of Canadian womanhood in the past that provided additional justification and inspiration for turn-of-the-century Canadian feminists. These women could invoke memory and tradition when calling for their own inclusion in the “imagined community” of the Canadian nation of the late nineteenth century.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, for those such as Curzon who were eager to widen their frame of national reference, Secord’s legacy could be part of an imperialist discourse, linking gender, race, nation, and empire in both the past and the present.

---

76. See Hobsbawm and Ranger, “Introduction: Inventing Tradition,” particularly their argument that invented traditions are often shaped and deployed by those who wish to either legitimate particular institutions or relations of authority or to inculcate certain beliefs or values (9). In this case I would argue that the Secord tradition served very similar purposes, although it was used to both legitimate and, for certain groups of women, to subvert.