

Don't Give up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812 By Donald R. Hickey

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Reviews

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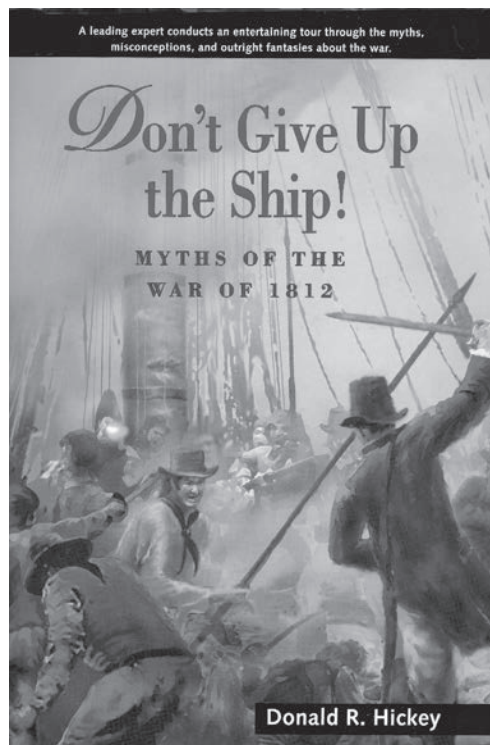
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Don't Give up the Ship! *Myths of the War of 1812*

By Donald R. Hickey. Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2006. xxix + 430 pp. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-896941-45-5. www.rbstudiobooks.com

Readers of *Ontario History* may recall that the CBC's list of the "Greatest Canadians" included three heroes of the War of 1812: Sir Isaac Brock (nestled at number 28 between Céline Dion and Jim Carrey), Laura Secord (35th), and the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, who, at number 37, relinquished the 36th spot to the American-born Ernie "Mr. Dressup" Coombs. 'Irony' is a word both abused and overused, but one cannot resist summoning it in this instance. Neither Brock nor Tecumseh — who lived most of his life in what is now Ohio — were Canadians by even the most expansive definition of the word. As for Laura Secord, the reputed saviour of Upper Canada, she merits just two pages in Donald Hickey's immensely diverting *Don't Give Up the Ship: Myths of the War of 1812*, and one of these is devoted to cutting her down to size.

It's that sort of icon-smashing that will probably earn Hickey, a professor of his-



tory at Nebraska's Wayne State College, more enemies than friends. Myths of the War of 1812, Hickey writes, "survive even after they have been disproved. Writers perpetuate them because they make for good stories, and even accomplished histo-

rians may find it easier to repeat a familiar story than to do the work needed to get at the truth.” (p. xxi) On these counts I must plead guilty as charged. Reading Hickey, I discover that I have rather credulously passed on several myths to my students. As matters would have it, Brock’s last words were almost certainly not “push on, brave York volunteers!” The Presidential mansion was known as the White House for some years before the British burned it, and the Battle of New Orleans was not the last engagement of war. Not only did the heavy frigate *Constitution* snap up two British vessels in a single action in February 1815 (the last in a remarkable string of victories for the great ship, still afloat and still commissioned in Boston), but sporadic single-ship actions continued in remote regions until June of that year. Moreover, as Hickey reminds us, for aboriginals the war was just another episode in a protracted struggle against the Americans, a struggle which, for them, neither began in 1812 nor ended in 1815.

Rather than a conventional narrative, the book is laid out in a question-and-answer format that makes for compulsive browsing. While Hickey admits that *Don’t Give up the Ship* is probably best read as a companion to a more standard account of the war, there should be no mistaking this for a book of trivia. In spite of its conversational tone, this is an exhaustive work of scholarship, concluding with forty-three pages of densely packed endnotes. Hardly any significant aspect of the war escapes Hickey’s attention. Its causes, its battles, the leadership, and the rank-and-file soldiers on both sides are all subject to the author’s myth-busting interrogation. In addition, some underappreciated aspects of the conflict, such as military intelligence and, especially, the naval war,

receive a very thorough treatment here. Regarding this last point, nautical warfare buffs may be irritated by Hickey’s inclusion of carronades, against all convention, in the gun counts of sailing vessels. But if you don’t know what that means, it won’t bother you.

Hickey reserves his most meticulous analysis for the war’s most vexing question: who won? Hickey is an American and a former instructor at the U.S. Naval War College, but he nonetheless concludes that the United States most definitely lost the war. In all of its war aims, he argues, the U.S. failed. In fact, he concludes, “given the state of its army, the logistical problem, and the enemy it faced, the War of 1812 was probably unwinnable for the United States.” (p. 308)

No doubt many Canadian readers will be relieved by this conclusion. Even today, tales of ‘our’ supposed victory in small battles fought half a century before our country came into being can stir the hearts of Canadians who, under normal circumstances, are given neither to jingoism nor to patriotic chauvinism. In his preface to the book, historian Donald Graves writes, “as a Canadian (and a proud descendent of Loyalists who fought for the crown in 1776-1783), I wish to make it perfectly clear that I do not agree with everything in the pages that follow.” (p. xvi) The fact that a serious writer such as Graves, can, in the case of the War of 1812, point not to the facts, but to the flag, as grounds for opposing an historical argument, is evidence enough that Donald Hickey has not only written a fine book, but has also performed a public service.

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