

Revenge, Honour, and National Identity
The War of 1812 and the *Shannon-Chesapeake* Action in Nova Scotia

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‘A six pounder is not an army, no more is 450 men, except in our puny war’ wrote one Upper Canadian in a Halifax newspaper in 1813.¹ Even contemporaries living in the British North American colonies (what is today Eastern Canada) recognized that the scale of the War of 1812 was tiny compared to the titanic campaigns being waged in Europe. By this point in the Napoleonic Wars, field armies could comprise hundreds of thousands of men: over 600,000 men made up Napoleon’s *Grand Armée* when he invaded Russia (1812), and the colossal Battle of Leipzig (1813) involved 600,000 soldiers in all. The British army that invaded and burned Washington, D.C. (1814), by contrast, fielded just over 4,000 redcoats. And the colonials also recognized, that to the wider British Empire, their Anglo-American conflict was a bit of a sideshow.

Still, 19th Century Haligonians were engrossed by the campaigns in Canada, just as they were by those of Lord Wellington in Europe. The naval actions of the conflict were not neglected, either. Most shockingly for Halifax, USS *Constitution*, the famous American heavy frigate, defeated two Royal Navy frigates in single ship actions. A third frigate was captured by her sister ship, USS *United States*, and by March 1813 three British sloops of war met the same fate. During the 19th Century, Halifax was a fiercely British city – proud subjects of the King and proud of the Royal Navy. Haligonians, who had enthusiastically followed the exploits of Admiral Horatio Nelson, were shocked by the losses, and struggled to come to terms with them; how could the Royal Navy be defeated by the upstart Americans?

¹ NSA, *Acadian Recorder*, Saturday 4 December 1813, 1:47 (online), available at <https://novascotia.ca/archives/newspapers/archives.asp?ID=800>.

Today, us
Canadians cling to
our national
prowess in hockey
and celebrate our
athletes. The
Toronto Raptor's
Championship win
in the summer of
2019 briefly drew
the attention and
admiration of the



country. In the early 19th century, our sports heroes were
the officers and men of the Royal Navy's frigates –
figures who held a great degree of star power. They

Not the Little Belt, depicting the action
between USS *Constitution* and HMS
Guerriere, just as *Constitution* moved to
cross the enemy's bows.

<https://bluenautilusart.com/>

captivated Halifax's youth and inspired many to seek a career in the navy, including a young Provo
Wallis, who won fame during the War of 1812, and would go on to reach the highest rank in the
Royal Navy. Beamish Murdoch, a future Nova Scotian historian who was a boy during the conflict,
remembered the 'sad series of disasters' which, while 'they are only connected with the history of
our province indirectly,' their impact 'on the minds of our people was great, stimulating their
patriotism and loyalty instead of depressing them.'² Faced with the losses of 1812, Halifax's papers
sought to defend the reputation and honour of their naval heroes, clinging to the fact that USS

² Beamish Murdoch, *A History of Nova Scotia, or Acadie*, Vol 3 (Halifax: J. Barnes, 1867), p. 334.

Constitution and her sisters vastly outclassed the RN frigates which they defeated. It was a remarkably similar tune to that sung by the press in England, which too sought to defend the honour of the Royal Navy and its sailors. This is still the understanding of today's British and Canadian historians. The historiography of the War of 1812, alas, has always been steeped in national biases.

When I set to work on the project that would culminate in *Revenge in the Name of Honour*, I quickly noticed that not all contemporaries seemed to agree that the American victories could be sufficiently explained by their marked advantage in size and firepower. None other than James Dacres, the captain of HMS *Guerriere* during her crushing loss to USS *Constitution*, declared at his court martial that the disparity in force had little to do with the defeat, and that he wished 'to be once more opposed to the *Constitution*, with [his old crew] under my command, in a frigate of similar force to the *Guerriere*.'³ The attitudes and actions of the Royal Navy's captains following the losses suggest

that Dacres' rather bold interpretation was not unique.

More than one

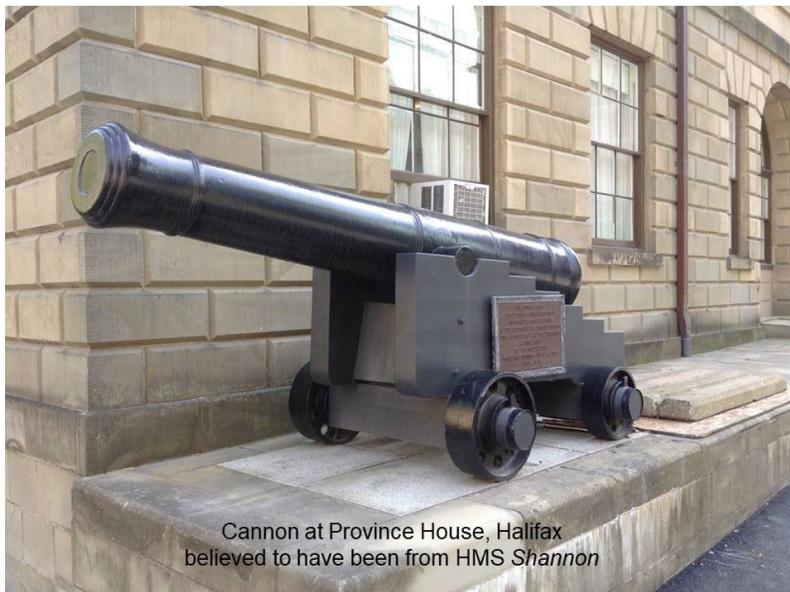
H.M.S. Shannon Leading Her Prize the American Frigate Chesapeake Into Halifax Harbour. Schletky, J.C., King, R.H., Haghe, L. Library and Archives Canada, R3908-0-0-E W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana, http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=en&rec_nbr=2836439



³ TNA, ADM 1/5431, Testimony of Dacres, CM *Guerriere*.

officer sought revenge and contemplated putting their ships and crew into unnecessary risk to do so. The boldest was Captain Philip Broke of HMS *Shannon*, whose tiresome and risky efforts to bring about a single ship action with an American frigate paid off on 1 June 1813, when in a brief action *Shannon* captured USS *Chesapeake*.

The victory reinvigorated the British. It was celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic, and Broke was showered with praise and honours from Halifax and British society. Halifax continued to celebrate the action well into the following century, and it became a staple of cultural memory and local literature. Its centenary in 1913 was marked by major events, and the 150th anniversary was celebrated with a naval spectacle, attended by warships from the Royal Navy, the still-young Royal Canadian Navy, and even from the United States Navy, once a bitter enemy but now united by a camaraderie built over two world wars. Alas, as with most aspects of the War of 1812, it had largely faded from public memory by the bicentenary in 2012, when the Government of Canada again commemorated the war, as part of a wider mission to celebrate a nostalgic vision of Canada's colonial past.



Photograph of an 18-pounder on display outside Province House, Halifax (seat of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly), believed to have come from *Shannon*. One believed to have come from *Chesapeake* is on display on the opposite side of the building. Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society, <https://hmhps.ca/sites/shannon-vs-chesapeake>

While the general public in Halifax has largely forgotten the conflict, the naval-interested public still hold a

certain delight in this particular bit of history. It has taken up more than its fair share of curated space

in museums and public places in the city, which is hardly surprising; not only was *Shannon's* senior surviving officer a Haligonian (Provo Wallis), but Canadians delight in any arena we can claim a victory over our cousins to the south. It was no different in Halifax in 1813, when the small town flocked from Sunday church to the waterfront to cheer on *Shannon* and the Haligonian lieutenant at her helm.



Lieutenant Provo Wallis, At the Time of His Victorious Entry Into Halifax Harbour, ca. 1800-1880, Davey Fitzner. Library and Archives Canada/William Kingsford collection/e010966281

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?app=FonAndCol&IdNumber=4310540>

Nicholas James Kaizer. *Revenge in the Name of Honour: The Royal Navy's Quest for Vengeance in the Single Ship Actions of the War of 1812.* Warwick: Helion & Company, 2020

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