

Playing the Blame Game in 1817

Matthew Kwiatkowski with Caleb Childers*

The book, *Causes of the Destruction of the American Towns on the Niagara Frontier* (CDAT), was Gen. George McClure's account of the fighting along the Niagara River in 1813. McClure presented his own version of a campaign that failed miserably and ascribed blame to others, most notably Secretary of War James Armstrong. The book was published by McClure's political ally, Benjamin Smead, who had recently launched the Republican newspaper *The Steuben Allegany Patriot*.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part of the book is McClure's description of what happened on the Niagara frontier in 1813. McClure gave a detailed account of his command. He also claimed that James Armstrong had prevented him from defeating the British Army by not allowing him to advance his forces when he had the opportunity. The second part of CDAT consists of 30 letters McClure exchanged with others involved in the war such as Armstrong, Gen. James Wilkinson, and Gen. William Henry Harrison, between September 21, 1813, and December 25, 1813. Ten of the letters were between McClure and Armstrong. McClure expressed his frustration over having a limited number of soldiers, the majority of which were militia. The third section is devoted to the militia. McClure explained that militiamen were capable with guns, but they had not received proper military training. He opined that the militiamen's term of less than a year was too short. McClure proposed a system that would train soldiers longer to prepare them for the hardships of war.

* * *

* Matthew Kwiatkowski and Caleb Childers are senior history majors at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The Niagara frontier had been one of the most active fronts for most of the War of 1812, with victories and defeats going back and forth. Although Republicans in the United States thought the conquest of Canada would be, according to Thomas Jefferson, a “matter of mere marching,” things were not going so well for the Americans in 1813. Poor leadership, unprepared soldiers, and a lack of supplies had hindered American action on the Niagara frontier.

According to historian Alan Taylor, George McClure “personified the Irish emigrant who rose to prosperity and influence by settling in the republican land of opportunity.”¹ Taylor noted that this carpenter had an interesting life as a farmer, miller, and trader after his move from Ireland to western New York. He was also a commander in the New York state militia, although he had not actually been in charge of any soldiers prior to the beginning of the war. A staunch Republican, he was eager to contribute to the operations on the Niagara frontier against the British and Native Americans. By 1813, Gen. Wilkinson had placed him in command of the entire American force along the Niagara River. McClure’s appointment was largely political.

McClure’s account of the war is limited to the events that took place along the Niagara River in the fall and winter of 1813. He was in command at Fort George, Upper Canada, which was just across the river from Buffalo. He was left in a very difficult position at Fort George because he lacked American regulars. In December he decided to abandon the fort and retreat to the American side of the river. Before doing so, he burned the nearby town of Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake), subjecting the civilian

¹ Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Random House, 2010), 247.

population to widespread suffering and property loss. McClure justified the town's destruction on the grounds that Armstrong had told him to burn the town if he thought it necessary, as well as on the report of his subordinate Col. Joseph Willcocks.² McClure felt that Newark provided a potential launching point for British attacks on the American side and Willcocks had informed him that the British were heading that way. McClure notes in CDAT that burning Newark "would deprive the enemy of quarters, and being winter, they would not be able to penetrate the earth... [and] would be compelled to retrace their steps to their garrison at Burlington Heights"(18). However, he did not destroy Fort George.

British forces sought to avenge the destruction of Newark by attacking settlements on the American side. While General McClure was away from his men, preparing for the defense of Buffalo, he left Captain Nathaniel Leonard in charge of Fort Niagara. However, Leonard did not stay at the fort. While absent, British Lt. Gen. Gordon Drummond's forces surprised and captured Fort Niagara on December 19, 1813. Leonard was captured shortly thereafter. Drummond advanced down the river, burning towns such as Lewiston and Black Rock. The Madison administration, and most of the public, placed full responsibility upon George McClure for the military disaster on the Niagara frontier.

McClure offered CDAT in 1817 to clear his name. In CDAT, McClure went as far as saying that Secretary of War Armstrong suppressed evidence that would have incriminated him and other political leaders for the failure of the Niagara campaign and destruction of the region (iv). He accused Armstrong of "a wanton robbery of fame."

² Pierre Berton, *Pierre Berton's War of 1812: Being a Compendium of The Invasion of Upper Canada and Flames Across the Border* (Toronto, Ont.: Anchor 2011), 630.

McClure reprinted letters from Armstrong, including the one that warranted the destruction of the town on Newark:

War Department, 4th Oct. 1813

Sir—Understanding that the defence of the posts committed to your charge may render it proper to destroy the town of N.A. you are hereby required to apprise its inhabitants of this circumstance, and to request them to remove themselves and effects to some place of greater safety,

Signed, J. Armstrong

In a letter to Armstrong on October 16, 1813, McClure wrote, “had I been supported by the regulars, the principal part of the enemy’s forces would have fallen into our hands” (34). McClure also asserted that Armstrong should have been much clearer in his orders. Regarding Armstrong, McClure stated, “To put the most charitable construction on his conduct, the destruction of our ill-fated frontier must have been predetermined; as to plead ignorance of our situation, and that of the enemy, would avail him nothing; the many letters he received from me would rise up in judgment against him” (14). McClure opined:

And I dare hazard the declaration, that if either General Dearborn, Harrison, Brown, Scott, P.B. Porter, and I will include Wilkinson and Hampton, had been at the head of the War Department in 1813, the union of the Militia of the northern states with the Regular Troops would have conquered Upper Canada, and the dreadful slaughter on the Niagara in 1814 would never have crimsoned the records of history (vi).

The final section of CDAT is McClure’s attempt to make peace with the men who returned to being his neighbors after the war. McClure celebrated them as heroes, “patriotic sons of liberty [who] entered Canada voluntarily, and cheerfully” (61). However, after praising the bravery of the militia, McClure asserted that they had been poorly trained. According to McClure, militia officers found “a competent knowledge of

their duty...impossible to obtain by the present regulations” (67). He proposed that the militia be divided into two or more classes, where commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers alike served in camp for two months out of the year.

McClure downplayed the fact that he had been in a position of responsibility at the outset, and had enthusiastically led his men into war. He attempted to place the blame on other men of power and praised his men despite their shortcomings. But McClure, like the United States more generally in the War of 1812, had learned some painful lessons: politics and military effectiveness did not mix; and, when invading another country, the ability to fire a musket was sometimes not enough.