

# Fortitude in Distress:

by Norma Hall and Barbara Huck

## THE NORTH WEST COMPANY AND THE WAR OF 1812

*By 1812, North America's rivalrous fur-trade companies were at each other's throats. Then the U.S. declared war on Great Britain and struck at Canada. For one fur-trade company, it was the beginning of the end.*

Looking back through a haze of nostalgia, twenty-first century aficionados of the North American fur trade often miss the difficulties and dangers associated with the continent's biggest presettlement business. Moreover, few remember that during the War of 1812, Montreal's North West Company played a significant role in the defence of "the Canadas." The company motto, Fortitude in Distress, was perhaps at no time more appropriate than during the War of 1812, for the NWC readily participated on the side of Britain and ultimately paid a substantial price for its involvement. As the second decade of the nineteenth century began, the fur trade had

reached a level of commercial rivalry that itself approached a state of war. The War of 1812, fought between the United States and Britain over westward expansion in North America and the rights of neutral ships on the seas, was not directly related to this fur-trade turmoil. However, the international conflict certainly augmented an often violent struggle to gain control over fur-bearing territories that had been waged for more than a century.

In 1812, the main adversaries in the fur wars were the London-based Hudson's Bay Company and its Canadian counterpart, the North West Company. But both were increasingly concerned about an upstart American company, headed by German-born New Yorker John Jacob Astor. Beginning about 1808, Astor's American Fur Company had been aggressively expanding its operations west from the southern Great Lakes; by 1810, it was bent on pushing its interests, by land and by sea, all the way to the Pacific coast.

The War of 1812 not only exacerbated this economic rivalry, it also took advantage of the expertise and experience of veteran traders who had long been involved in heated conflicts over boundaries and intense competi-

tion for the loyalties of native North American suppliers. And there were some possible benefits for Canadian fur traders from war with the Americans.

Looking south, the Nor'Westers were particularly interested in two American posts—Detroit, on the western end of Lake Erie, and Fort Michilimackinac just east of the Straits of Mackinac, the pivotal waterway between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. Each post controlled access to vast fur-bearing territories beyond.

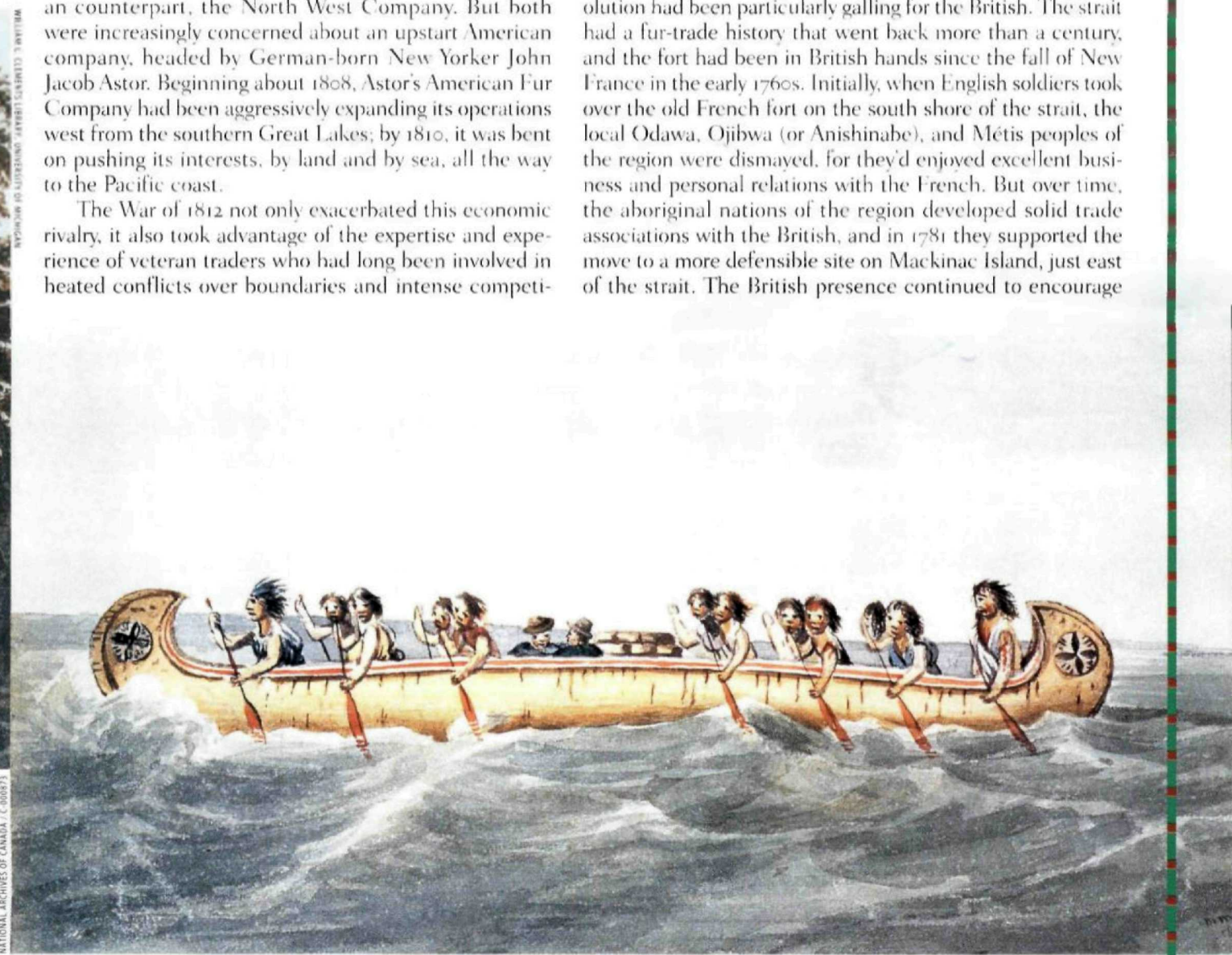
The loss of Michilimackinac following the American Revolution had been particularly galling for the British. The strait had a fur-trade history that went back more than a century, and the fort had been in British hands since the fall of New France in the early 1760s. Initially, when English soldiers took over the old French fort on the south shore of the strait, the local Odawa, Ojibwa (or Anishinabe), and Métis peoples of the region were dismayed, for they'd enjoyed excellent business and personal relations with the French. But over time, the aboriginal nations of the region developed solid trade associations with the British, and in 1781 they supported the move to a more defensible site on Mackinac Island, just east of the strait. The British presence continued to encourage



*A View of the Post of St. Joseph at the Head of Lake Huron (The Last Garrison in British America) taken July 12, 1804 by E. Walsh.*

Fort St. Joseph was built by the British in 1796 on St. Joseph Island at the eastern entrance of the channel linking Lakes Huron and Superior. In July 1812, at the beginning of the War of 1812, the British captured the American post at Fort Michilimackinac by launching a surprise attack from Fort St. Joseph.

Right: *North West Canoe on Lake Ontario, Ontario, 1840 by Millicent Mary Chaplin (1790–1858).*



Canadian traders, and by the mid-1780s, the North West Company dominated the trade at Michilimackinac.

These fur-trade relationships continued even after the American Revolution, despite treaties in 1783 and 1794 that officially turned over control of the straits to the Americans. Though native North Americans had sometimes found the British to be rigid and obtuse, they were nevertheless preferable to the American rebels, who were bent on clearing and settling the land. The aboriginal nations were therefore appalled when the English soldiers were told to vacate the fort on Mackinac Island in 1783; in concert with Canadian traders, they put pressure on Britain to remain for another thirteen years. During this period, as the unfinished fort on the cliff overlooking the south shore of Mackinac Island slowly deteriorated, the British Indian Department solidified its alliances with many native peoples in the region. When finally in 1796 the soldiers withdrew to establish a new fortification on St. Joseph Island on the Canadian side of the border, the native alliances held.

But Montreal traders continued to dominate the fur trade in the village that had grown up below Fort Michilimackinac (or Fort Mackinac, as it's known today). When John Jacob Astor wanted to establish a foothold on Mackinac Island, he agreed in 1811 to a cooperative arrangement with the NWC, in which his interest became known as the South West Company (SWC). He did not concede the independence of the American trade entirely, however, and persisted in mounting competitive expeditions to the Pacific Coast.

This, then, was the situation in the Upper Great Lakes when in 1812, at the height of the Napoleonic conflict in Europe, the United States declared war on Britain in North America. Though substantially outnumbered by the Americans, the British did have a number of advantages: an able and prescient administrator in Major-General Isaac Brock, alliances with many native tribes, and the valuable skills of the Canadian fur traders. The traders were accustomed to discipline, unfazed by hardship, wily, resourceful, and able to travel swiftly over vast stretches of unmarked territory. In addition, the mainly French-Canadian, Scottish, and Métis employees of the North West Company were also ready to commit acts of violence in support of a cause. To a man, they could see that the war was an event of no small consequence in terms of the trade. And though the war effort never completely superseded business considerations, they agreed to aid the British as they could.

In fact, the NWC had anticipated war well before it was declared, for they had been forewarned by their native and Métis allies. As early as 1809, the Americans had made efforts to allay native antipathy at a meeting with many First Nations leaders at Fort Michilimackinac. Though the American governor general made a persuasive speech and gave them many gifts, the native leaders bluntly told him they had pledged allegiance to Britain at Fort St. Joseph. This news immediately prompted a threatening response. "Ignore the post at St. Joseph," they were told, "because

we Americans will seize it before the end of the summer."

In the audience was the brother of John Askin Jr., regional staff officer of the British Indian Department. He quickly relayed the threat to his superiors, who in turn informed Captain Charles Roberts, in command at Fort St. Joseph, to begin to prepare for war. Fortunately, the threat was premature, for Roberts was particularly vulnerable. He had just forty-four men under his command, men he described as "so debilitated and worn down by unconquerable drunkenness that neither fear of punishment, the love of fame or the honour of their Country can animate them to extraordinary exertions."

Convinced that his only hope of victory was to strike first, he turned to local fur traders, letting them know that Britain intended to afford "every assistance and Protection Possible to Promote the Interest and Security of the North West Company." In response, Lewis Crawford of the SWC raised an expeditionary force of 140 men.

Captain Roberts also spent the succeeding months recruiting at least four hundred Anishinabe, Odawa, Menominee, Winnebago, and plains Dakota warriors, many allied to the fur traders by family ties, to join forces with him. These included fifty Dakota led by trader Robert Mascotapah Dickson; about forty Anishinabe under John Askin Jr., whose brother had raised the initial warning about the Americans and who also recruited among his mother's Odawa nation; thirty additional Odawa led by trader Amable Chevalier; forty Menominee led by Tomah and twenty-four Winnebago under Big Canoe.

The Nor'Westers also took other precautions. In 1811, William McGillivray, the chief director of the North West Company, for whom Fort William on Lake Superior had been named, established a route from York (now Toronto) north to Lake Simcoe and west to Georgian Bay, providing an alternative to the normal route west through Lake Erie. And when war was declared on June 18, 1812, the Nor'Westers were first to obtain and disseminate preemptive information.

Coincidentally, in a footnote to history, June 18 was also the day that Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk and the majority shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, issued a pronouncement that he was about to establish a colony of soldier-settlers in Red River, in what is now Manitoba. This was, in a sense, another declaration of war, this time on the Nor'Westers' western front.

For the moment though, the Nor'Westers' main concern was the Americans, and the company's partners were ready to participate in military action. From a business perspective, they thoroughly agreed with Brock, who had stated in February that possession of both Detroit and Michilimackinac was pivotal, for without them "not only Amherstburg but most probably the whole country, must be evacuated as far as Kingston." They were therefore prepared to launch their attack even before the Americans at Michilimackinac had word that war had been declared. This element of surprise was in large part responsible for the victory of Captain Roberts and his

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force of 400 aboriginal warriors and about 180 fur traders in mid-July.

The motley army, which included the NWC schooner *Caledonia*, ten bateaux, and a huge complement of canoes, set out from Fort St. Joseph on the morning of July 16. Though tactically perfect, it was a less-than-ideal day for travelling for Captain Roberts, who was suffering from "a great debility of the stomach and the bowels." He was understandably grateful for the "almost unparalleled exertions of the Canadians who manned the boats."

The force landed, unnoticed, on the north shore of Mackinac Island the following day. It quickly scaled the Turtle's Back, the hill that rises above Michilimackinac, and took the fort without "one drop either of Man's or Animal's blood [being] Spilt."

Being taken completely unaware—the small complement of less than sixty American soldiers still had no idea that war had been declared—was a large part of the easy victory, but equally important was the terror that so many native warriors evinced among them. Raised on nursery tales and fireside legends of "Indian massacres," the Americans panicked at the sight of so many armed natives and immediately surrendered. Ironically, perhaps, the British and their aboriginal allies both felt it was the Americans who had a superior reputation for brutal savagery.

The victory had significant repercussions. The NWC supply lines were secured, its interests at Michilimackinac were protected, and its position was greatly enhanced. Even Lord Selkirk felt compelled to laud the efforts of his rivals. Their "contribution to the capture," he wrote, "was an event certainly of as high importance as any that occurred during the ... war."

Further, not only had the NWC's assistance been prompt and concerted—even the "presents" necessary to formalize the First Nations' alliances were North West Company property—it was also voluntary. The declaration of martial law in Lower Canada, which was accompanied by a general embargo on goods and a compulsory oath of allegiance, was not passed by the legislative assembly until August 3, two weeks after Michilimackinac was taken.



BEAVER COLLECTION

There were other advantageous consequences for the NorWesters. Astor's warehouses were now in Canadian territory, obliging him to rely on the NWC to circumvent border restrictions and embargoes, and the North West Company's ability to influence Canadian authorities was solidly reinforced. The victory also meant that the Canadians could rely on increased support from their aboriginal allies and continued neutrality from potentially hostile First Nations. Finally, they controlled crucial lines of communication between east and west.

To augment their position, Detroit was targeted next and taken on August 16. Fur trader Dickson—a Scot with flaming hair who had married into the Yanktonai Nakota—participated with his Dakota warriors, but the victory was mainly due to the native force under Shawnee war chief Tecumseh, who had long worked at creating aboriginal resistance to American territorial ambitions. To a degree, this victory, too, could again be attributed to American xenophobia, for it prevented the Americans from mounting a competent defence despite superior numbers and munitions.

Following these successes, William McGillivray was appointed lieutenant-colonel in command of the Canadian Volunteers, a corps of three regiments, each with between eight hundred and one thousand men. Despite this honour and its responsibilities, McGilliv-

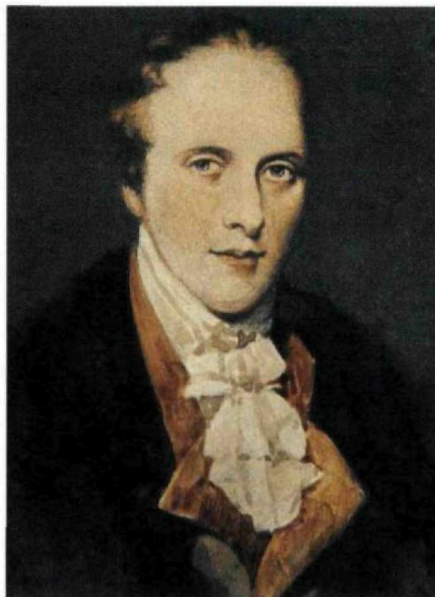
Among the contenders for the rich North American fur trade was German-born John Jacob Astor (1763–1848), above left, who established the American Fur Company in 1808 and began aggressively expanding its operations west from the southern Great Lakes. Seeking to establish a foothold on Mackinac Island, he agreed in 1811 to a cooperative arrangement with the NWC. He didn't entirely concede the independence of the American trade, however, and continued to mount competitive expeditions to the Pacific coast. Though he suffered setbacks during the War of 1812, he revived his business at the end of hostilities and became America's first millionaire.

William McGillivray (1764–1825), above right, was chief director of the North West Company after 1804. During the War of 1812, he commanded a company of voyageurs, assisting Isaac Brock at the capture of Detroit. In recognition of his services, he was appointed lieutenant colonel in command of the Canadian Volunteers. In 1814, he was named to the legislative council of Lower Canada. Between 1814 and 1816 he directed the North West Company's opposition to the Red River Settlement and was captured when Lord Selkirk seized Fort William (named for McGillivray) in 1816 in retaliation for the destruction of the settlement. McGillivray emerged unscathed from the protracted legal proceedings that followed. After the 1821 union between the Hudson's Bay and North West companies, he was made a member of the joint board formed to manage the fur trade. He died in London, England.



Shawnee war chief Tecumseh (above, left) allied his forces with those of the British and Canadians during the war of 1812 and was instrumental in the victory over the Americans at Detroit in August 1812. He died in battle fourteen months later.

Thomas Douglas (above, right), Earl of Selkirk and the majority shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, established a colony of soldier-settlers in Red River, in what is now Manitoba.



Mackinac Island (below), drawn from nearby Round Island, circa 1812. This was the last of three locations in the Straits of Mackinac for the military post known as Fort Michilimackinac. (The fort here today is known as Fort Mackinac.) In 1634, French explorers established a fort on the north shore of the straits at St. Ignace. About 1715, a new fort was erected on the south shore, at present-day Mackinaw City, Michigan, and held until the British troops arrived in 1761, during the Seven Years' War. During the American Revolution, the post was moved to nearby Mackinac Island, then in 1796 ceded to the U.S. In the War of 1812, British forces from Fort St. Joseph captured Fort Mackinac without firing a shot by taking advantage of the hill above the fort. The post was returned to the U.S. in 1815.

ray's main concern continued to be the fur business. The *Minutes of Deliberations and Transactions* for 1812 indicate that the war was simply viewed as an obstacle to be surmounted by judicious planning. Nor had the NWC forgotten the Pacific challenge posed by Astor. His men had arrived first at the mouth of the Columbia River by sea in April 1811 and begun building a post, which they called Astoria. Nor'Wester David Thompson, travelling by an arduous route over the Rockies, got there in mid-July and had to satisfy himself with establishing small houses inland. To augment their presence in the Pacific region, the Nor'Westers sent two partners from England by ship and other parties overland. Though the Northwest Coast was officially undesignated territory, they carried with them letters of marque that demanded the surrender of Fort Asto-

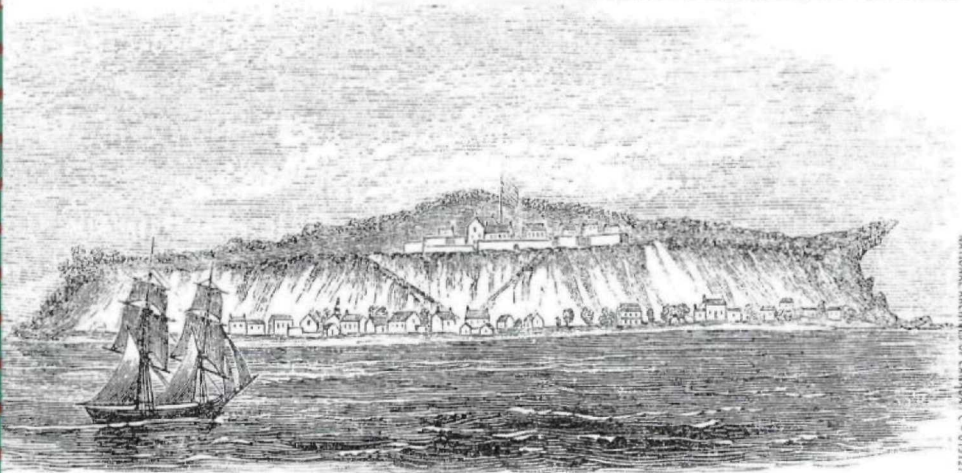
ria. They also had a contingency plan to guard against a collapse of the trade should the company's supply lines to the distant posts be severed. It was, in fact, just such a circumstance in 1813 that convinced the Americans to sell Fort Astoria and several outposts to the Canadians.

To ensure that such a thing did not happen at their own posts, the NWC partners passed the following directive at their 1812 meeting: "All the Departments ... [should keep one] fourth of the whole Outfit in reserve to [supply posts] in the Interior should circumstances prevent a supply from being sent by any way or any means."

Further bowing to the demands of war, the partners instructed that a unit of as many men "as could be spared ... set out in the *Invincible* with a supply of arms ammunition & Provisions for St. Maries—then to act as circumstances may require."

Despite all these forward-looking measures, a year later the North West Company was facing mounting debts and large losses. Their plans had not been enough to negate the impact of the war. Two company ships, the *Caledonia* and the *Detroit*, both loaded with cargo, had been captured by the Americans, and returns were down in all departments. The Red River Department was cited as an example. There, the paucity of trade goods that had reached the interior had occasioned "contempt in the Eyes of the natives."

Nor did the coming year promise to be any better. "On account of the war," the partners felt it was unlikely that supplies sent from Montreal would arrive at many posts in the interior. Faced with looming disaster, they ordered substantial staff cuts, eliminating 150 engagés, clerks, interpreters, and canoe makers. All departments were persuaded to reserve a quarter of all supplies to protect themselves from "Misfortune" should they be faced with Americans "over-running Canada." Posts were instructed to preserve "such a quantity of Tobacco & High Wines as would afford a moderate supply for the Country without any aid from Canada." And out on the Columbia, though the company was still interested in



securing an advantageous position on the Pacific, employees were told to "curtail as much as possible every unnecessary Expense in order to meet the present Scale of the Trade."

Leading by example, the partners even censured the practice, enjoyed by most of them, of travelling speedily with lightly loaded canoes.

Their worries were justified. Having begun the war with just one ship and a dilapidated schooner, General Brock had inventoried all available lake-going transport and acquired a number for service in the Provincial Marine. Of NWC watercraft, even canoes were subject to requisition. The company's larger vessels, ostensibly on military duty as troopships and supply transports, were only lightly armed and continued to ferry fur-trade cargoes to and from company depots. Then on September 10, 1813, both the army and the company were dealt a major blow when the Americans captured the entire British naval force and brought the vessels to Put-in-Bay on Lake Erie. Suddenly, a vital transportation route was lost, and lines of communication were disrupted.

The Americans were jubilant. The victory, wrote a Baltimore news correspondent, presaged the end of both the North West Company and the demise of many of their native allies:

*All the places of deposit for Indian supplies will be broken up, and the savages employed in the business of the British during the summer and cut off at this critical season from their accustomed resources must perish by the thousands for want of food and clothing. The trade of the North-West Company, a mighty mercantile establishment of vital importance to Canada and of great consideration to the Mother Country, is done.*

He also predicted both Michilimackinac and Fort St. Joseph would fall into American hands. The prediction was a little premature, but major challenges lay ahead for the Nor'Westers. To provision Michilimackinac and maintain contact with the West, they turned to the northern route mapped out two years before by William McGillivray, but it was arduous and ran partly over dry land. The result was severe supply shortages.

Though goods arrived from England by ship by the following February, the problems getting them inland seemed almost insurmountable. Desperate, the NWC petitioned the British government for access through Hudson Bay, the route the HBC used. Permission was eventually granted for the voyage in, but the two companies could not agree on terms to bring the goods out of the interior. In the Columbia District, events proceeded more smoothly. Just the threat of a British warship was enough to convince the Astorians to sell off the fort and its contents in December 1813.

Still, the Nor'Westers continued to assist with the war effort. Robert Dickson, "with about Six hundred Warriors and One hundred White People of every description," joined McGillivray's voyageurs from Michilimackinac under retired trader William McKay to take Prairie du Chien and to secure points along the Mississippi in Wisconsin.

On hearing of this conquest, the NWC was optimistic

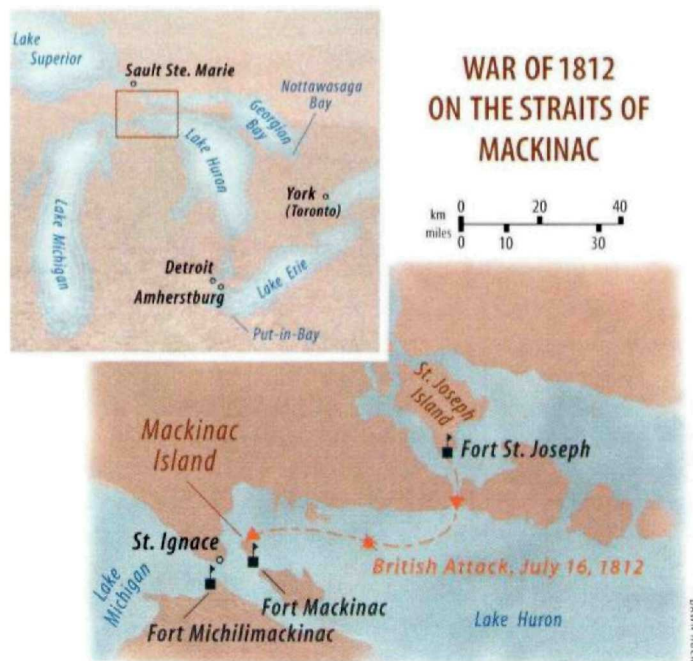
that favourable terms could be negotiated with the U.S., enabling the company to trade in the area. But that optimism would prove to be misplaced.

To the north in Red River, the supply problems prompted a major crisis as opposition to Lord Selkirk's settlement hardened to outrage. Claiming a right to regulate bison hunting and pemmican production in Rupert's Land, the HBC seized pemmican belonging to the Nor'Westers and stored it at Brandon House, a Hudson's Bay Company post. The NWC decried the move as a "Violent and illegal" pretence.

The act was seen as akin to war and the partners resolved that in future all employees would "defend the Property at all Hazards," and thereby "render it a dangerous service to any man who may presume to plunder them." The resolution was sealed with a "feast of 13 pts of liquor and Provisions" for each man.

On the Great Lakes, the Americans spent the summer of 1814 harassing the Nor'Westers. In early July, they left Detroit with two ships and three schooners carrying more than five hundred sailors and seven hundred soldiers. Stymied by fog and a lack of familiarity with the local geography, the Americans failed in an attempt to cut off the NWC supply route at the Georgian Bay depot and set sail for Michilimackinac. En route, they razed the deserted fortifications on St. Joseph Island, destroyed the NWC's fine new schooner *Perseverance*, seized the *Mink*, and pillaged the company property in Sault Ste. Marie. But the attack on Michilimackinac on August 4 failed. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert McDouall's garrison of fewer than two hundred easily repulsed the invaders, aided by their familiarity with the island's topography and dense natural cover, as well as their "gallant" native allies.

Determined to do more damage, the American schooners set off to intercept the *Nancy*, due to arrive with provisions, but she was too fleet for them. Alerted by a canoe-borne messenger, she fled east and hid in the mouth



of the Nottawasaga River at the south end of Georgian Bay. Unfortunately, the Americans found her there and burned her to the waterline. Content at last, the Americans departed, leaving the *Scorpion* and the *Tigress* to maintain the blockade. The tale was not quite complete, however. Using bateaux and canoes in a night attack, Dickson and some two hundred warriors, along with some fifty sailors from Michilimackinac, overran the two American schooners.

It was the last act of the war, but not the last battle for the NWC. The Treaty of Ghent negotiations began on August 6, and immediately Britain made it clear that it wished to return to the *status quo pro ante bellum*, the situation prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Since such an outcome would return the Canadians' territorial gains in Michigan and Wisconsin to the Americans, the Nor'Westers were aghast. Having poured their resources into the war on the British side, they had assumed their interests would be taken into account. When it was clear they would not, they scrambled for redress, filing claims for compensation, citing the losses suffered at Sault Ste. Marie and the marine vessels and cargoes lost during the war. In the end, however, though an amount was awarded for "zeal and services," only the *Nancy's* war-related services were recognized.

As to boundary considerations, the British tendency to concede conquered territory had been anathema to the NWC since 1783. In March 1815, William McGillivray warned that the return of Michilimackinac would terminate the excellent relations the British had with First Nations to the south and west. He wrote:

*The Americans, aware (from the circumstances of the late War) of the influence established by means of the Trade carried on by Canadian Merchants and their Agents resident among the Indians, will naturally use every means to prevent a recurrence [sic] of this influence ... and experience has shewn how much the safety of Upper Canada depends upon that friendship.*

Lieutenant-Colonel McDouall at Michilimackinac also protested, noting the rights of aboriginal peoples in the region:

*My perplexity is as great as ever, as to the order, sent me ... to give up Fort McKay and the Prairie des Chiens, to the Americans [sic], as the ninth article of the Treaty affords the most clear & circumstantial evidence, that the great extent of Country upon the Mississippi ... reverts again to the Indians, as it is expressly stipulated that they are restored to all the possessions, rights & privileges, which they enjoyed in 1811.*

He also balked at the idea of relocating and repeated McGillivray's caution about losing the carefully cultivated friendship and support of the region's First Nations. By June 24, however, he had resigned himself to ceding Michilimackinac and Prairie du Chien to the Americans.

Astor had more success with lobbying the U.S. gov-

ernment about Fort Astoria. Swayed by the man who was soon to become the first American millionaire, the U.S. insisted on its return. Simon McGillivray, William's brother, business associate, and a long-time agitator on behalf of the NWC, countered that not only had the fort been legitimately purchased from the Americans, but British sovereignty extended over the whole Pacific slope by right of exploration and occupation. It was an argument that would take thirty years to resolve.

Attempting to take advantage of the Nor'Westers' weakened state, Lord Selkirk also tried to press his advantage at Red River. To increase competition, he instituted a system of profit-sharing among HBC officers and in the spring of 1816, his men destroyed the NWC's Fort Gibraltar at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

The response, in June of that year, was the Seven Oaks Incident, in which a party of Métis and Nor'Westers gathered to escort a shipment of pemmican from the west. The party was intercepted by twenty-five HBC colonists and the governor, Robert Semple. The HBC men were quickly surrounded and twenty-one of them, including Semple, were killed. Selkirk responded by bringing soldiers from Montreal. En route they seized Fort William, site of the NWC's annual rendezvous on Lake Superior. This time the Nor'Westers did get some assistance from the government, for Selkirk was ultimately required to pay damages.

Overall, assessing the contribution of the North West Company to the War of 1812 must be done within limits. The company clearly viewed the war as only one of a series of challenges to the advancement of its cause—a profitable trade—and pursued its commercial interests almost without pause. Yet this strategy was ultimately enormously costly and increased the NWC's vulnerability in a ruthlessly competitive business. Further, it's clear that though the company's gains south of the Great Lakes bolstered Britain's eventual negotiating position, these territories were ultimately deemed not worth preserving. In short, what were seen as the business assets of the fur traders were willingly surrendered in favour of peace.

The company's war losses were followed by others. The fur trade amalgamation with the HBC in 1821 sacrificed the company's name; the Pacific holdings were lost to the Americans under the Oregon Treaty; and the reputation of the North West Company as a defender of the Canadas was lost as the War of 1812 was moulded into a mythology deemed more respectable for an emerging democratic nation. ■

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Norma Hall is a masters student studying history at the University of Manitoba. Barbara Huck is the author of *Exploring the Fur Trade Routes of North America*.

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Both Fort Michilimackinac, reconstructed on the site of the original in Mackinaw City, Michigan, and Fort Mackinac, on nearby Mackinac Island, feature interactive displays and military reenactments, and are open from May to mid-October. On St. Joseph Island, ninety kilometres south of Sault Ste. Marie, are the ruins of Fort St. Joseph with an interpretive centre, open from late May to early October.