The War in Canada 1812-1814

By

Ensign James Cochran
41st Regiment of Foot

Being a transcription of a manuscript
housed in the
Museum of the Welch Regiment (41st/69th Foot),
Black and Barbican Tower, Cardiff Castle, Cardiff, Wales

Transcribed by T.R. Hobbs
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INTRODUCTION

The manuscript known simply as *The War in Canada: 1812-1814,* is an anonymous work housed in the Regimental Museum of the Welch Regiment [41st/69th Foot] in Cardiff. Its origin is unknown and in its few occasional notes that accompany the manuscript no details are provided of the donors. It is written on lined paper, half-letter size, in a neat, tiny hand. Currently the document is bound, but there is no indication that it was originally in that state.

In the Spring of 2006 I received an invitation from the Trustees to prepare an up-to-date transcription of the manuscript which by then was fragile, and the ink fading. Mine was not the first attempt at such a task. Fifteen years previously another had been prepared. Unfortunately, it suffered from several defects, not then least of which was the tendency to use American spelling when the original author used English forms. Further, the apparent unfamiliarity of the transcriber with the geography of the war of 1812 resulted several errors of spelling.[1]

The anonymity of the original document is matched by the lack of a date. The *terminus ad quem* for the writing must be 1815when the author concludes the manuscript with the cessation of hostilities on December 24th, 1815, and the arrival of the news in Canada two months later in February 1815The author also shows familiarity with the terms of the treaty.[2] Two candidates have been suggested as the author of the document. One is Ensign James Cochran of the 41st Regiment of Foot, who served briefly with the Regiment in Canada during the war, and the other is Captain Peter Latouche Chambers, also of the 41st, described by an observer as *"fearless and dashing"*, and *"fiery and impulsive".*[3]

Chambers was one of the more controversial members of the officer's mess of the 41st. At one time he was banned from the Mess for disorderly conduct in the

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[1] For example "Tidell" for Trudell, and "Gullson's: for Dolson's

[2] This clearly precludes Antal's date for the manuscript as 1814. See S. Antal, *A Wampum Denied: Proctor's War of 1812.* Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997, p. 63n.

[3] These are descriptions from another anonymous document from the war which first appeared in 1848 in the *United Services Journal.* It is the product of John Richardson, Gentleman Volunteer with the 41st throughout the war.

assault on a fellow-officer. Throughout his time with the regiment he carried on a campaign against Lieutenant Bender, Adam Muir's brother-in-law, and also despised Proctor, the commander of both the Right Division and the 41st Regiment.

Through a comparison of handwriting in the document with other pieces of handwriting inscribed in the margins of a later book on the war [see below Appendix], I am convinced that the writer was James Cochran, the young ensign. Further, comments made in the marginal notes match the values and sentiments toward certain officers that we find in the longer document. But what do we know of this man?

Cochran is a Scottish and Irish name, and it is more than likely that James was of Irish ancestry. His death announcement for April 14th, 1876 states that he was "*In his 85th year*"[4] Thus making his year of birth 1791-2. We know that he joined the 2nd Battalion of the 41st on September 17th 1812 as an Ensign of twenty or twenty one years. This is an old age for such a junior rank. His service in Canada during the war was brief. He landed with the 2nd Battalion in May of 1813 at Quebec, and joined the survivors of the 1st Battalion after the Battle of Fort Stephenson in early August of the same year. For one month he was seconded to the 1st Battalion, but rejoined the 2nd in September 1813 when it had moved to Amherstburg. In late September the Detroit frontier was abandoned by the British Right Division, and the remnants of the Division moved westwards along the Thames River, heading for Burlington Heights. On October 5th, 1813 the remnants of the Right Division were overtaken by the much larger pursuing force under William Henry Harrison, at Moraviantown. Cochran, along with several officers and Other Ranks of the Regiment were taken prisoner. He spent much of the rest of the war at the POW camp in Chillicothe, Ohio, and very soon after his release embarked with the Regiment for Europe on November 4th, 1814. His time in Canada had been little more than five months, and his combat experience limited to one disastrous defeat at the hands of the Americans.

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[4] The announcement appeared in the *Timaru Herald* of Wellington, New Zealand. We do know that his son, born in 1834, emigrated to New Zealand and became a prominent businessman.

After the war Cochran promoted to Lieutenant on December 28th, 1815. With the downsizing of the army at the end of the Napoleonic Wars he, along with many other officers of the 41st, were placed on half-pay. But by October 25th, 1821 he reappears on the full list of officers of the Regiment with the appointment to Adjutant. Six years later, on February 26th, 1827, he was promoted Captain. Fourteen years later, on the 23rd November, 1841 he was given the rank of Brevet Major. Cochran served in the Burma Campaign as a field officer and adjutant between 1824-1826, and then in the Afghan War in 1842. He retired from the army in 1845 at the age of fifty three, and with the rank of Brevet Major.

Hart's Army List for 1857 offers a full account of Cochran's military service in later life.

Major Wm H Cochran served in the campaigns of 1813 and 14 in Canada including the action at Moravian Town. Also the campaigns of 1824-5 in Ava, including the capture of Rangoon and Martaban, siege of and capture of Denobia, Battles of Frome and Pagalun Mew. Served the campaign of 1842 in Affghanistan, and commanded a column of attack in the action of the 28th April in the Pisheen Valley; present also in the actions near Candahar and Goiane, and before Ghuznee; occupation and destruction of the fortress and of Cabool. Expeditions into Cohistan, storm, capture and destruction of Istaliff, and the numerous minor affairs in and between the Bolan and the Khyber Passes

For this service Cochran was awarded the India Medal. The error of Wm H is probably because the next officer listed with a similar name had the initials Wm H. Additional information is found in a graveyard of St. Peter's Church, Church Corner, Riccarton, Christchurch, New Zealand is a grave with the following inscription.

John Moore Cochran
Eldest son of Major Cochran
Late HM 41st Regt d 25 May
1884 Aged 50

The newspaper obituary in the *Christchurch Star* in June 1884 lists the full name of James Cochran, and offers his home as "*County Tyrone, Ireland*". This might refer to his birthplace. In Cochran's own obituary in the *Timaru Herald* offers the following information:

COCHRAN – On April 14th, 1876
At Easton Terrace, Dublin, Ireland
Major James Cochran, late of H.M. 41st Regiment
In his 85th year.

County Tyrone, in the central-north of Ireland, in modern Ulster, is a long way from Dublin. In the extant Irish genealogical records and atlases of the period I can find no reference to an "Easton Terrace" in that city. There is a small area known as Easton just to the west of Dublin, but no terrace by that name. We do know that James Cochran was married to Elizabeth Mary Moy, who died in 1858 at the age of forty five.[5] Reading between the lines, it is likely that the younger Cochran made the best of his military father as an aide to his business interests. These interests were not always that successful. John Cochran's wife, Fanny Sarah Miller, also came from a military family.[6] The son John is also named in Harts Army Lists for 1857 as a Lieutenant in the Royal Tyrone Fusiliers. At that time he would have been twenty three years old.

Cochran wrote other material on the War of 1812, and definitely not for publication. In 1842 John Richardson's account of the War of 1812 was published. Shortly after Cochran came into possession of the book and took an instant dislike of the volume. In a rather failing hand Copchran wrote several marginal notes that cast aspersions on many of the characters of the 41st Regiment. Hancock and Dean, the first British soldiers who fired at the American invasion near Amherstburg in 1812 were accused of being drunk and asleep at their posts at the River Canard. The implication is that, had they been awake, they might have hindered the US forces. This is ridiculous. Lieutenant Geale, and Captain Muir, dedicated and brave soldiers, were characterized as "*chattering geese*". Richardson himself is maligned for his

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[5] *http://www.cotyroneireland.com/burial/clonfeacle.html*
[6] See *https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP18731202.2.6.*

claim to the rank of Major in his writing career. Cochran insisted that, since this was awarded him in his service with the Spanish army after the War of 1812, it was an illegitimate rank. The notes have been transcribed by Tom Fournier, and are added in an Appendix at the end of the transcription of the main document.

The marginal notes are written by a man fast approaching middle age, and the handwriting is less secure than the confident script of the account of the War of 1812. But, as the reader will note, the 41st Regiment officer corps was definitely divided into cliques. Cochran makes sure that his preferences are well known. One can perhaps imagine a sense of disappointment in a man who, after almost thirty five years of service, had only reached the rank of Brevet Major. This would mean that, on his retirement in 1845 at the age of fifty four he would be paid only at the rank of Captain. This is an advanced age for a captain. Peter Latouche Chambers, who had risen to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the Regiment in India, had gained the rank of Captain when in his mid-twenties. The harsh judgments on his fellow officers in the marginal notes do not appear in the earlier document. What criticisms he expresses are based on sound military judgments, dealing with preparations for and conduct of certain encounters on the field. But, his later evaluation on Proctor, for example, is cutting and vindictive.

...in no one instance had this "gallantry" [of the 41st]
been usefully aided by the measure of Colonel, or General
Proctor, whose malign influence had been seen in the
affair at the River Raisin in January...where his incapacity
needlessly cost the sacrifice of one fourth of his
Regt – and equally so in the two bootless [?]
expeditions to the Miami...and the glaring
imbecility at Sandusky. [see below p.]

Are these the words of one who has had time for sober second thought, or are they bitter and unfair ramblings of an older, and perhaps deeply disappointed man?

What of the document in the context of the contemporary literature on the War of 1812? First, it has a limited perspective on the war. It focuses entirely on the encounters between British and American troops in the Canadas. Nothing is said of

the naval battles on the high seas, the campaign along the east coast of the United States, or the events in the Gulf of Mexico. Nor is anything said of the war in the Maritime colonies, such as Ile de Saint Jean [PEI], Nova Scotia, New Brunswick. Newfoundland is only mentioned in relation to the activities of the Newfoundland Regiment in Upper Canada.

Second, it concentrates only on those events that Cochran either took part in, or was able to consult those who had participated. He is dependent upon conversations with and information he had gained from other participants., and this information would have been easily accumulated. In the three and a half months he spent at Amhertsburg he would have ample opportunity to talk with the survivors of the River Raisin and Miami campaigns. He arrived at Sandusky the morning after the ill-fated attack on Fort Stephenson, and would have learned much of the bungled attempt on the stockade, and the deaths of so many men, including Shortt and Gordon.

On the other hand, he misses and confuses other important events. Contrary to what he claims, the attack on York in April 1813 did result in the burning of many pubic buildings in the city. The two American schooners, the *Hamilton*, and the *Scourge*, did not sink under sail, trying to negotiate a squall, but were sunk at anchor at the dead of night, surprised by a powerful and sudden wind and heavy sea. During the attack on the American relief column at the siege of Fort Meigs in May 1813 he gives all the credit to Captain Chambers, and does not mention Captain Adam Muir who was in charge of the counterattack. The official account by Proctor gives the lion's share of credit to the latter officer. Such an oversight by Cochran would have been understandable, had he not, in his later notes, strongly criticized Proctor for his failure to mention Captain Tallon in a later engagement.

Third, its attempt at being a commentary of the war relegates it into a rather passionless, sometimes pompous series of observations. It lacks the immediacy of John Le Couter's journal, or of Shadrach Byfield's memoir. The moral vision of Dunlop, or the cautionary tale of the pious George Fergusonm at least provide such memoirs with a sense of purpose. Even the man whom he viewed as his main rival, John Richardson, had the definite advantage of being part of many of the actions he

describes, and he offers so much of his own personal vision of the war. Cochran's vision is confused, and detached and somewhat truncated. The opening and closing of his work focus on the actions and attitudes of the United States, and his most important conclusion is that the war was damaging for that nation in several ways. It is a very weak conclusion and ignores the effect the war had on British interests, and the Colony Britain had come to defend, the Canadas. The post-war years for both Upper and Lower Canada were near disastrous. A severe economic depression, a shrinking and angry population, and growing political dissent, all added to the already heavy burdens. The causes of these factors are glossed over with a few platitudes about the resilience and loyalty of the local population. The truth was far different.

For the modern reader the style of the document is awkward. However, it matches the convoluted prose of much of the correspondence between generals and their subordinates of the period, and the run-on sentences of Richardson. It is not an easy read, but well worth the effort.

The date of the document is difficult to determine, and one can only speculate. It is possible that the work was completed within a decade of the end of the war. The handwriting is that of a young man, with good eyesight. Shortly after the end of the war there was a flood of books written by ambitious ex-officers and a few private soldiers. They often wrote of their own experiences, as did Shadrach Byfield and George Ferguson[7], but others wrote of the land of Canada in the hope of attracting new immigrants from Britain. It is possible that Cochran wrote between 1817 when he was placed on half-pay, and 1821 when he was brought back into full military service.

Why the work was written is unknown. No introduction or preface is found in the book. Unlike the bitter comments of the annotations on Richardson, he is not writing this to correct views of already published authors. There were none available within a decade of the war. Richardson's work first appeared in 1842,

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[7] Both of these writers wrote at least two decades after the war, although Ferguson's work, which consisted of several chapters of his entire life, had been in process from an early date.

when Cochran was over fifty. One could speculate that the hope of financial gain was high on his mind when he wrote. If so, that hope was unfulfilled. As far as I am able to ascertain, the work was never published, nor was it in a suitable form to be published. It is written on small sheets of paper in an almost illegible hand. In any event publishing in the early nineteenth century was a risky business given the state of British libel laws. The standard and widely used book on libel laws by Francis Ludlow Holt, published in many volumes between 1808 and 1818 stated that there was a very fine line between "*individual feelings*" and "*the law of interdiction*", and that line was all that separated an author from "*penal visitation*", should he be found guilty – a not uncommon occurrence.[8] Clearly the marginal comments in Richardson's book were never intended for publication, and by the time they were written both Muir and Geale and Chambers were dead. The guarded comments and occasional criticisms of the larger document might well have been intended for publication, but this is merely speculation, and not proven.

One inevitable comparison with Cochran's work is that of John Richardson first published in 1842 and slightly revised by 1848. Richardson's work is that of a professional writer, full of the biases, prejudices of his day, but it is more readable than Cochran's. Richardson could tell a story, and enlivens his narrative with personal observations, dramatic scenarios, and at times an over-zealous evaluation of the skills and character of officers he served with. Like Cochran, Richardson served with the 41st Regiment, but Richardson did not receive a commission to serve. He was a "gentleman volunteer". He did eventually receive a commission in the 8th Regiment of Foot later in the war.

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[8] There had been several cases before the criminal courts in England which tested the libel laws. Many artists and writers were found guilty, even if what they had said and depicted were deemed to be true. Chief Justice of the King's Bench, Lord Ellenborough [1750-1818] had argued in several cases that persons of high office and prominence should be immune to criticism no matter what they had done. He was notoriously biased in the case of Admiral Lord Cochrane, and William Hone. The latter case had to do with reputation and libel. See B. Wilson, *The Laughter of Triumph: William Hone and the Fight for a Free Press.* London: Faber and Faber, 2005.

Richardson's lengthy involvement in the war is indicated by the sense that he is writing of what he knows. In his book the 41st figure prominently. In Cochran's work this is not the case. Apart from some tidbits of information, he offers no place of prominence for the 41st, but instead offers a matter-of-fact account of the war and the Regiment's part in it. He remains throughout the passionless observer, and it is this cold objectivity that takes the edge of a potentially interesting manuscript.

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No work such this is accomplished without much help and encouragement. It is my duty and privilege to acknowledge what I have received from many quarters. John Dart, late of the Welsh Regiment, and formerly Curator of the Welch Regiment Museum in Cardiff, deserves my deepest thanks for his encouragement, cooperation and very warm welcome at the Museum during my visits. His boundless generosity of time and effort is deeply appreciated. John was a marvelous host and is delightfully enthusiastic about the history of his beloved "Welch".

Similar thanks are due to the former Trustees of the Museum who extended the invitation to study and transcribe the manuscript. In a day when old Regimental numbers and names are being rapidly lost in amalgamations and reorganizations, it is encouraging to meet those so dedicated to keeping important military traditions alive, especially those that link British Regiments with their service in Canada.

Two colleagues of mine in the Forty First Regiment of Foot [Military Living History Group] are owed many thanks. They are Jim Yaworsky, of The University of Windsor, and Tom Fournier of Cambridge Ontario. I am happy to call them my friends, and fellow history enthusiasts. They are dedicated to the history of the 41st in Canada from 1799 until 1815, and have accumulated vast amounts of information on the regiment in that period. I thank them for their encouragement.

During the course of such work one meets new friends, and I am happy to acknowledge the friendship and help of the late Jon Latimer of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and the University of Wales at Swansea. His book on the war of 1812[9] was, surprisingly, the first major book by a British writer on the war.

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[9] J. Latimer, *1812: War with America.* Harvard University Press, 1997.

From 2000 until 2016 I have been a member of the Forty First Regiment of Foot [MLHG]. This group of enthusiasts is a source of pleasure and pride. We make no pretense of recreating exactly the conditions of the British soldier in the War of 1812, we are proud of our reputation of getting it as right as possible, and proud also of keeping the service of the 41st Regt. in Canada as alive as possible before the Canadian and American public. Each year the unit is privileged to visit sites associated with the war – Fort George, Fort Erie, Lundy's Land, Stoney Creek, York [Toronto], Fort Meigs, Fort Malden, Monroe and others. It is a privilege to walk in the same paths as Cochran, Richardson, Byfield, Chambers, Proctor, Muir and hundreds of others who wore the red-faced tunics of the Forty First Regiment of Foot.

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