

Merry Hearts Make Light Days

Donald Graves, éd. *Merry Hearts Make Light Days. The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Conteur, 104th Foot.*

In May of 1812 the brig *Ann* headed westward from England into the Atlantic carrying a number of British army officers towards Canada. The vessel encountered its first gale while they were at dinner, and a 17-year-old lieutenant described the resulting chaos: "The old brig was

rolling, gunwale under...the swinging lamp touched the ceiling planks. Away went seats, Soup, Mutton, dumplings, crockery, knives, forks, Mustard Pepper, Sauces....The Lady screamed...the Gentlemen shouted....All our chairs were broken, our table cloths cut, the Cook ill or sulky-obliged to cook for ourselves and to prepare our own Meals. Nor was this the worst, the rascal Sailors stole a considerable portion of our stock as we discovered. However, Merry hearts make light days!" (p.59) This last phrase became Lieutenant John Le Couteur's credo which he managed to maintain pretty consistently throughout his service in British North America during the War.

He was born on the Island of Jersey into a military family, fortunately, one that kept written records. *Merry Hearts* covers Le Couteur's life from his earliest memories through his boyhood military education and his periods of army service in British North America from June 1812 until December 1815 and again from 1816 to 1817. This journal was worked on in later life by Le Couteur who based it on a daily diary, memory, correspondence, official documents and his mother's diary. As well, correspondence is inserted (e.g. chapters 12, 14) and the account in chapter 4 of the winter march of Le Couteurs' regiment, the 104th Foot, from New Brunswick to Upper Canada in 1813, is taken from a text published in the *Canadian Defence Quarterly* rather than from the draft in Le Couteur's papers. In short, this publication originates not from a single document but from several sources.

Le Couteur joined his regiment in Saint John, New Brunswick in June 1812, marched with it to Upper Canada and served there until February 1815. He participated in the raid on Sackets Harbor, the battle of Lundy's Lane, the skirmish at

Conjocta Creek, the seige of Fort Erie including the assault of 15 August 1814, and the clash at Cook's Mills; he also witnessed the surrender of the Americans at Beaver Dams. His first-hand accounts of these actions, particularly at Sackets Harbor, Lundy's Lane and Fort Erie, convey the immediacy of battle but just as interesting are his reflections on leadership, his own emotions and the suffering of the men.

In the editor's words, "Le Couteur's war was a subaltern's war and a light infantryman's war." and so we see his experience "from the viewpoint of a junior officer." (p. 18) rather than from that of field or high command. Being a well-born and well-educated officer, Le Couteur was able to move in the highest colonial civil and military circles, frequently attending balls and parties as well as occasionally dining with commanding officers from the army and navy, but he was not privy to higher military decisions nor informed about overall strategy. Although the journal provides snapshots of the hard life of the rank and file trooper, what it also makes clear—explicitly and implicitly—is the social chasm between officer and soldier. In short, this journal is a social document and not simply an account of military life and adventures.

Carleton University Press is to be congratulated for this first full publication of the journal, edited and with notes by Donald Graves, arguably the leading scholar currently writing about the War of 1812. He provides an informative Introduction and a profusion of endnotes which, among other things, explain the meanings of military terms and obscure words of the period, the cost of living, civilian and military income, literary allusions and the identities of many individuals. The well chosen illustrations include early nineteenth-century views of places where Le Couteur

served as well as some of his watercolours and sketches. The book's detailed bibliography and index give it the full range of scholarly apparatus which makes the absence of maps all the more surprising.

While *Merry Hearts* may be read as an exciting story of a young man risking his life far from home, it is much more. Besides students of the War of 1812 or of Canadian military history, the journal should interest a wider readership because it presents so many insights into other areas like the functioning of the British military in that period, military-civilian relationships, and pioneer conditions in Upper Canada.

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