

Let's party like it's 1812

We won the war against the Americans. Why are we afraid to say so?



BY CONNIE WOODCOCK, TORONTO SUN

FIRST POSTED: SATURDAY, JULY 23, 2011 4:51:31 EDT PM | UPDATED: FRIDAY, JULY 22, 2011 4:56:09 EDT PM

There's a big birthday party coming up in Canada next year, but chances are you haven't heard a word about it.

It's the 200th anniversary of the start of the War of 1812. Museums are being renovated, battle sites are being spruced up, information centres are being readied, plays are being written, re-enactments are being organized.

The province is even opening an interpretive centre in the building now on the site of Upper Canada's first parliament at the corner of Front and Parliament Street in Toronto.

But it's taking place well below most people's radar because there hasn't been much publicity from the usual cheerleaders — government.

Oh sure, the Harper government promised a big celebration during the election campaign, but there's still an uncanny silence about it considering it's only a year away.

Why would that be?

We won, didn't we?

Well, yes. But as far as I can tell, we're going to avoid mentioning that touchy subject as much as possible. You have to drill deep into both the federal and provincial governments' websites to find any mention at all and when you do, it's apt to be all about what great friends we are with our American neighbours, who were once our worst enemies.

Mostly you find lists of planned war-themed events.

In Morrisburg, Ont., for instance, they've already held a re-enactment of the Battle of Crysler's Farm at Crysler Park, just outside Upper Canada Village. They've done the same in Wasaga Beach, commemorating a battle that was an American victory.

\$1 million

At Old Fort Erie, they've opened a new commemorative centre.

And in Amherstburg, they're spending nearly \$1 million of federal taxpayers' money to improve the exhibits at the Fort Malden national historic site.

But very little has been said. We wouldn't want to offend anyone, would we?

There's been more talk about it in the U.S. than here. For instance, New Orleans is planning three years of celebrations beginning and ending with tall ships sail-pasts.

In the July issue of American Conservative magazine, writer Daniel Larison argues the war was a "disaster" for the U.S.

"The U.S. failed in acquiring any of its objectives, and the peace settlement restored things to the way they had been before the war," he wrote. "We had the good fortune that the British were otherwise occupied fighting France for most of the conflict, and we still suffered some of the worst humiliations in our history."

That was in response to a piece by Jonathan Rauch in the Daily Beast arguing it was "the best war ever."

“Not a ton of people died, an important principle (American sovereignty) was at stake, and the outcome was good for all concerned.”

Then a third writer jumped in.

Writing in the magazine Foreign Policy, Stephen Walt argued trying to conquer Canada was “an act of folly by the young American republic, even though it got lucky and managed to eke out a draw.”

No matter what you think about that last quote, that was lively debate, wasn't it? But no such discussion has been happening in Canada, or if it has, it's well hidden.

That's a shame since so many Canadians have never even heard of the War of 1812, as we discovered years ago when we took our nephew from British Columbia to Queenston Heights. It was all a mystery to him and since history is taught so little anymore, I'd bet even people who live near some of the war's battlefields are vague on it.

It wouldn't be a bad thing to stir up a little more excitement over the bicentennial, even if that means committing a major Canadian sin: Cheering for ourselves.