

Two hundred years ago today, the Treaty of Ghent was signed to end the North American War, 1812-14. Sir Bob Russell (MP for Colchester in Essex) looks back on a war now mainly forgotten, and a book which reminds us what was at stake.

Totalitarian states are notorious for rewriting history, but they are not the only ones that do so. I am appalled that Britain is equally guilty of not telling people about all their nation's history—choosing to ignore parts of it. In 1812 British forces had burned down the White House, and among those who probably torched that and other public buildings in Washington were soldiers from the 1st Battalion the 44th East Essex Regiment, which had spent the previous years fighting the French in the Mediterranean.

History taught in schools includes the Romans and Saxons, 1066 and the Norman conquest. It features the battle of Trafalgar of 1805 and the battle of Waterloo in 1815—two great British victories in the European conflicts against France and Napoleon. Those British triumphs changed the history of Europe; of that there is no doubt. The North American war of 1812-14 also changed the course of history—Britain's and that of the USA. Had the fledgling United States of America, which had been in existence some 30 years, following its war of independence from Britain, been successful in its wish to annex British North America—today's Canada—and had it not been thwarted by the British Army and Navy, ably supported by loyalists who wished to live under the British Crown rather than a US President, that would have changed the history of the world. Arguably, the 10 provinces and three territories of Canada would today be states of the United States of America.

Former American President Thomas Jefferson boasted that conquering what we today know as Canada would be a "mere matter of marching." His successor as President, James Madison, declared war on Britain in June 1812. The Upper Canadian capital of York—now Toronto—was burned by the Americans in the spring of 1813. Parliament buildings were reduced to ashes. At the time of the 1812-14 war, that part of the continent included two British colonies: Upper Canada and Lower Canada. They united in 1841 to become the British Province of Canada, and upon confederation in 1867 with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, following the passage of the British North America Act 1867, became the Dominion of Canada. Today the country is known as Canada.

100 years before the outbreak of the first world war in August 1914, British troops invaded Washington. It was the last time the mainland of the USA had unwelcome foreign soldiers on its

soil. Canada played a major role in the first world war from the outset. What if it had not existed as a country loyal to the British Crown, as would have been the case had the outcome of the North American war been different? The course of the war would have been different without the Canadians. It was to be another three years before the USA entered the war, in 1917.

In the second world war, a quarter of the planes, pilots and air crew came from Canada and Britain's battles in the skies would almost certainly have had a different outcome—it could be argued that there would have been defeat—if it were not for the bravery of the Canadians, long before America joined in. Canadian troops bravely fought there at Juno beach, which was under their control on D-Day in 1944.

I first became aware of the North American war of 1812-14 when in June last year I had the good fortune to accompany the Colchester military wives choir to Hamilton, Ontario, where they sang at the Canadian international military tattoo. It was the first of our now 80 or so military wives choirs to sing overseas. Between the various acts, there were cameo scenes re-enacting various clashes that occurred in 1813 between loyalist forces in British North America and those from the then 15 states of the USA. The same was scheduled for this year's tattoo in respect of 1814.

That summer, by coincidence, a fantastic book was published, entitled "When Britain Burned the White House: The 1814 Invasion of Washington". The author is Peter Snow, the highly respected journalist, author and broadcaster, perhaps best known for presenting BBC's "Newsnight" from 1980 to 1997 and for being an indispensable part of election nights. The first words are: "In August 1814 the United States Army is defeated in battle by an invading force just outside Washington DC. The US President and his wife have just enough time to pack their belongings and escape from the White House before the enemy enters. The invaders tuck into dinner they find still on the dining room table and then set fire to the place."

Mr Snow observes that 200 years ago Britain was America's bitterest enemy. Today, the two countries are close friends. He describes the invasion of Washington DC as "this unparalleled moment in American history" and remarks on "its far-reaching consequences for both sides—and Britain's and America's decision never again to fight each other."

The events in question were no small retaliatory incursion into the US by Britain. British forces—soldiers and sailors—totalled 4,500, including many who had fought Napoleon. The Royal Navy had some 50 ships in battle readiness. In the book's introduction, Mr Snow states:

"The British invasion of Washington is not an episode in their history that Americans recall with much relish—any more than the French do the Battle of Waterloo. In Britain, very few people know it happened or even that there was a so called War of 1812."

It is not as if the war was a brief affair. It was spread over three years, culminating officially in a treaty on Christmas Eve 1814, but with a further battle at New Orleans on 8 January 1815 because news of the treaty, signed in Europe, was not known to either side. Mr Snow says of the war:

"It was actually one of the defining moments in the history of both countries" and describes Britain and the USA as "now inseparable friends, then bitter enemies."

The White House bears the burn marks to this day and, on visits to it, former Prime Minister Tony Blair and our current Prime Minister—in March 2012—referred to the historic event of 24 August 1814 when British forces set fire to the White House. As an historic footnote, the White House was staffed largely by slaves.

Mr Snow's book concentrates on the final three weeks of the war, the scene for which he summarises as follows: "The fierce struggle of August and September 1814 was one of the last bouts of fighting between two nations that later became the closest of allies. It defines the strengths and weaknesses of each: the British empire—overstretched and arrogant, but fielding a navy and army of experienced veterans who could sweep all before them; the young American republic, struggling with internal divisions but infused with a freshness of spirit and patriotic fervour. And underlying this often bloody conflict is the grudging respect that often marked dealings between the two sides. This was after all a battle between two supposedly civilised nations who spoke the same language, shared family ties and were neither of them bent on the other's outright ruin."

As perhaps we might expect, the Americans claim that they won the war—well, they would, wouldn't they? The truth, of course, is that if they had won and taken over British North America—a vast area of the continent—as states of the USA, there would not today be a proud, independent Commonwealth country called Canada, with Queen Elizabeth II as its Head of State.

But as Peter Snow writes, the events of 14 September 1814, with the British decision neither to continue the naval bombardment at Baltimore nor to proceed to put troops ashore, were interpreted by the Americans "as a glorious triumph...transformed by American myth-makers into a resounding victory that would become an emblematic moment in US history."

After Baltimore, Britain and the USA sought to bring the war to a close. Back in Britain, the cost of a foreign war and severe economic pressures at home helped to convince the Government of Lord Liverpool to seek a peace settlement, and the treaty of Ghent was signed on 24 December 1814. Mr Snow observes: "Both sides abandoned territorial ambitions. Britain renounced any claim to places like Maine, America scrapped any claim to Canada."

Sadly, it took a month for news to cross the Atlantic. Not knowing of the signing of the treaty in Europe, only two weeks later the armies of Britain and America faced each other just outside New Orleans. The battle that followed was a resounding victory for the Americans, but even if Britain had won, it would have counted for nothing. The compelling words of Mr Snow explain why: "New Orleans was an utterly futile waste of life: even if the British had triumphed, captured the city and plunged deep into Louisiana, they'd have had to hand every inch of it back under the peace treaty signed a fortnight earlier 5,000 miles away."

The Treaty had been confirmed by the British Parliament on 30th December 1814, and was ratified by the US Senate on 18th February 1815.

A brief footnote on the war of 1812-14 and Anglo-American relations : The words of the national anthem of the United States of America, "The Star-Spangled Banner", come from a poem written about a battle towards the end of the war. American Francis Scott Key wrote "The Defence of Fort McHenry" after he witnessed British forces bombarding the American fort at Baltimore. Shortly afterwards, the poem was set to existing music that had been written in Britain. Thus, it is British music that the Americans took for their national anthem. The music was written for words originally known as "The Anacreontic Song", later as "To Anacreon in Heaven", which was the official song of the Anacreontic Society, an 18th century gentlemen's club in London named after the 6th century BC Greek poet Anacreon. The music is attributed to the composer John Stafford Smith, from Gloucester—it is believed he composed it in the mid-1760s while still a teenager—and was first published by The Vocal Magazine in London in 1778.

For a good 100 years "The Star-Spangled Banner" was a well-known patriotic song throughout the United States. It was officially designated as the US national anthem on 3 March 1931. When you next see Americans, hand on heart, singing their national anthem, give a smile in the knowledge that it is British music that accompanies their patriotism.