

Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst: Everyday Life in Upper Canada, 1812-1814 By Dorothy Duncan

Ross Fair

Volume 104, Number 2, Fall 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065443ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065443ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Fair, R. (2012). Review of [*Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst: Everyday Life in Upper Canada, 1812-1814* By Dorothy Duncan]. *Ontario History*, 104(2), 157–158. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065443ar>

*Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst:
Everyday Life in Upper Canada, 1812-1814*

By Dorothy Duncan

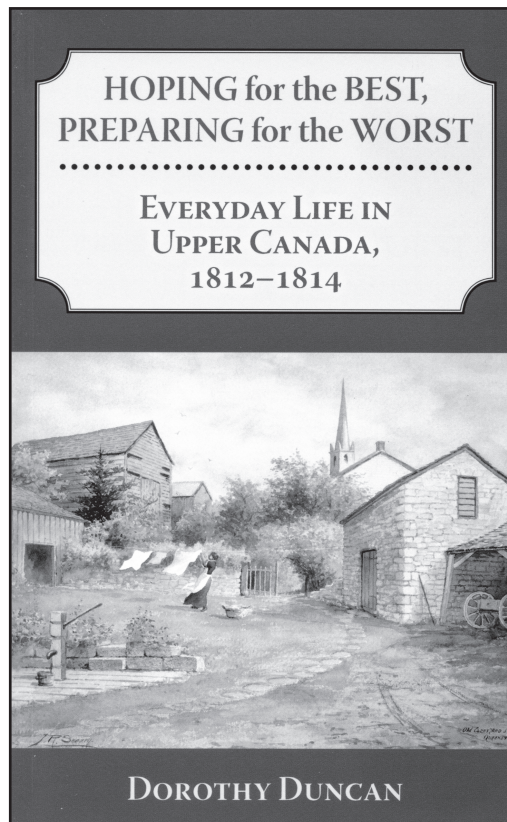
Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2012. 248 pages. \$21.99 paperback.
ISBN 978-1-45970-592-0. (www.dundurn.com)

In *Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst*, Dorothy Duncan, the recognized historian of Canada's culinary history, provides a wide-ranging survey of information about life in the territory that became Upper Canada, from the French era of the early 1700s to the settlement of the province in the decades that followed the American Revolution. Using a variety of secondary sources, she relates numerous interesting vignettes about living conditions and communications among First Nations, fur traders, those at military posts, and settlers who chopped their farms out of the North American forest. In a series of short chapters that rely heavily on passages transcribed from her sources, Duncan describes the diversity of the people who came to settle the province while linking them together by the challenges that all faced relative to travel, securing sufficient food

for survival, and remedying illness and injury in this frontier colony. In doing so, Duncan provides descriptions of everyday life as it transpired for the people of Upper Canada prior to the outbreak of War of 1812. That these general experiences re-

mained the bases of life during the war needed to be made much clearer during Duncan's first dozen chapters, for she does not discuss the War of 1812 until the conclusion of Chapter 5, when she describes how the declaration of war was first heard in Upper Canada in June 1812. Following this brief mention, Duncan then continues to unfold more aspects of colonial life in the prewar era. The result is that she does not engage the subject of everyday life in Upper Canada between 1812 and 1814 until Chapter

13 of her twenty-chapter book. Only later does she demonstrate the purpose of dealing at length with life in Upper Canada



prior to the war.

At this late point in her study, Duncan notes how news of the 18 June 1812 declaration of war in Washington had reached Upper Canada by 26 June and the distant Fort St. Joseph on Lake Huron by 8 July. This relay of information, she explains, was accomplished because of “the web of human relations that had been forming for years – military, fur traders, First Nations, farmers and Métis...” (140) Despite the colony’s often daunting geography and climate and the sparseness of the frontier population, action could happen rather quickly or, at least, as immediate as the province’s physical characteristics permitted. Duncan’s insight is a late but critical link to her purpose in writing this book: to explore “the everyday lives of those trying to survive and prosper in this sparsely populated land of astonishing harshness, beauty, and bounty in the years leading up to the War of 1812 and during the conflict.” (15) It is a late insight, for only here in Chapter 13 does it become clear how the subjects of the first dozen chapters of the book (whose title suggests it will focus on the years 1812-1814) connect to both the progress of the war and the experiences of living through it.

When Duncan does, at last, start describing wartime experiences, she begins with an odd point of view. What is her lengthiest chapter on the subject draws heavily upon the journal of Lydia B. Bacon who accompanied her husband, an American officer through Indiana Territory, Kentucky, and Ohio. Through Bacon’s reports, Duncan is able to provide fascinating information about travels through the American frontier and the August 1812 battle at Fort Detroit from a woman’s point of view, but it is not clear how lengthy excerpts from Bacon’s journal illuminate everyday

wartime life for Upper Canadians. In fact, some of the best statements that Duncan provides about colonial life during the war appear in her four imagined letters written by a fictitious Upper Canadian “Martha” to her sister “Mary” in Scotland. These relate an amalgam of everyday experiences that Upper Canadians would have experienced in the 1812-1814 period.

Overall, it is unfortunate that Duncan’s work was published with a title connecting it to the War of 1812 era only, for it tends to mask the significant insights that her book provides. As mentioned, Duncan points out that the war highlighted the webs of relationships that she shows as having developed in the decades of prewar settlement and trade patterns. These existing webs facilitated the communication of information across the vast expanse of the province during the war and affected the course of the conflict. Secondly, Duncan’s book does reinforce the fact that the war—and its fallout—only served to exacerbate the difficult frontier living conditions of a sparse population which had worked tirelessly for years to settle the often harsh world of Upper Canada. Furthermore, one might also point out that *Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst* highlights the need to revisit those many historical tidbits that were assembled by local historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Duncan’s book reminds us that there is a wealth of information in these sources that should be further mined—and refined—as a part of renewed research into the conditions of Upper Canadian settlement and society prior to, during, and following the War of 1812.

Ross Fair,
Department of History,
Ryerson University.