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J. Mackay Hitsman

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SIR GEORGE PREVOST'S CONDUCT OF THE CANADIAN WAR OF 1812

J. Mackay HITSMAN

Historical Section, Army Headquarters, Ottawa

Canadian historians have unfairly condemned Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost's conduct of the War of 1812. Obsessed by Prevost's ineptness as a field commander before Plattsburgh, and his curbing of rash or incompetent subordinates on earlier occasions, they failed to recognize or appreciate the extremely competent defensive strategy displayed in his overall direction of the war. This resulted in Canada being kept safe from a numerically much stronger enemy during two and a half years of fighting.

Much of their muddled thinking can be traced to *The Letters of Veritas*, which began appearing in *The Montreal Herald* on April 7, 1815. These ten letters, republished as a pamphlet in July, purported to be "a succinct narrative of the military administration of Sir George Prevost, during his command in the Canadas; whereby it will appear manifest, that the merit of preserving them from Conquest belongs not to him". This partisan effort formed the basis for the contention, in *The Quarterly Review* (London, July, 1822), that the British Army should have shown to greater advantage. Prevost's former Civil Secretary replied with *Some Account of the Public Life of the late Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, Bart. particularly of his services in the Canada's; including a reply to the strictures on his military character, contained in an article in The Quarterly Review for October, 1822*¹ (London, 1823). Unfortunately, however, this spirited defender did not make the most of Prevost's personal papers and his was a dull volume.

George Prevost was a French-speaking Swiss Protestant and eldest son of one of the original officers appointed to the 60th (or Royal American) Regiment of Foot. Born on May 19, 1767, he distinguished himself in the West Indies during the opening years of the War with Revolutionary France. On St. Vincent he was wounded twice while leading his battalion. In 1798 he became military governor of Dominica. Three years later he was created a baronet for defending this island against a French expedition. His promotion to the rank of lieutenant-general followed. In 1808 Prevost was appointed lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia. Later that year he served as second-in-command and principal planner of the operations which resulted in the capture of Martinique.²

¹ Should read "The Quarterly Review for July, 1822".

² *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, LXXXVI, Pt. 1 (London, 1816), 183-184. See also *Dictionary of National Biography*.

On September 14, 1811, Prevost arrived at Quebec to assume the duties of Commander of the Forces and Governor-in-Chief of British North America. One of his early decisions was to appoint the capable but impulsive Major-General Isaac Brock as Administrator of Upper Canada while Lieutenant-Governor Francis Gore was absent on leave in England. Prevost and Brock were disturbed by the reports emanating from Washington. The slogan "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" aptly expressed a growing feeling that Britain must rescind its obnoxious Orders-in-Council or face the prospect of war, with Canada as the obvious battle ground. The regular troops and fencibles in Canada numbered only 5,500 all ranks.³ The Provincial Marine, under military control, was small and incompetent. The militia of Lower Canada numbered upwards of 60,000 on paper, "ill armed and without discipline"; the number in Upper Canada was calculated at 11,000 men, "of which it might not be prudent to arm more than 4,000", since large numbers of inhabitants were recent immigrants from the United States.⁴

Early in 1812 Prevost authorized the recruiting of a regiment of Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles from all the Scottish settlements in British North America and a Provincial Corps of Voltigeurs in Lower Canada. His conciliatory attitude towards the French-speaking Canadians, who had been alienated by Sir James Craig's "reign of terror", induced the Legislature of Lower Canada to provide a Select Embodied Militia of 2,000 young bachelors. The strong American element in the Assembly of Upper Canada did its best to frustrate Brock and authorization was given only for the addition of flank companies of trained volunteers to each sedentary militia battalion.

British plans for defence had long been based on a simple premise: so long as the Royal Navy ruled the North Atlantic and Quebec was held by a competent garrison, "any American attempt to conquer the colonies must be impotent and abortive".⁵ An enemy advancing down the Lake Champlain route into Lower Canada would not have time to reduce both Montreal and Quebec before the campaigning season was ended by the approach of winter. Spring would bring up the St. Lawrence a powerful fleet and an army capable of recapturing whatever had been lost. During the crisis occasioned by the Chesapeake Affair of 1807, Craig had suggested that the militia of the Montreal district and any regulars not needed at Quebec might retire into Upper Canada. These, and what regulars and militia Gore could spare, might harry the rear of the Americans who would be moving down river after capturing Montreal.⁶

³ Public Record Office, W.O. 17 Series contains relevant monthly strength returns.

⁴ P.R.O., C.O. 42/146, Prevost to Liverpool, May 18, 1812.

⁵ C.O. 42/318, Simcoe to Dundas, Feb. 23, 1784.

⁶ C.O. 42/136, Craig to Gore, Dec. 6, 1807.

Gore had agreed. Since the Americans had no naval vessels on the Great Lakes to counter those of the Provincial Marine, he would be able to defend Upper Canada against any "partial or sudden incursion".⁷

On May 18, 1812, Prevost sent off a lengthy despatch to London. This was an astute appreciation of the military situation and detailed the policy he intended to follow should war come. He pointed out that Kingston was exposed to sudden attack which, if successful, would cut all communications between Lower and Upper Canada. Montreal possessed no fortifications and its defence must depend upon a field force on the south shore, holding a line stretching from La Prairie to Chambly, plus naval command of the St. Lawrence and Richelieu Rivers.

Continuing he wrote:

Quebec is the only permanent Fortress in the Canadas. It is the key to the whole and must be maintained: — To the final defence of this position, every other Military operation ought to become subservient, and the retreat of the Troops upon Quebec must be the primary consideration....

In framing a general outline of Co-operation for defence with the forces in Upper Canada, commensurate with our deficiency in Strength, I have considered the preservation of Quebec as the first object, and to which all others must be subordinate: — Defective as Quebec is, it is the only post that can be considered as tenable for a moment, the preservation of it being of the utmost consequence to the Canadas, as the door of Entry for that Force, the King's Government might find it expedient to send for the recovery of both, or either of these Provinces, altho' the pressure of the moment in the present Extended range of Warfare, might not allow the sending of that force which would defend both, therefore considering Quebec in this view, its importance can at once be appreciated.

If the Americans are determined to attack Canada, it would be in vain the General should flatter himself with the hopes of making an effectual defence of the open Country, unless powerfully assisted from Home: — All predatory or ill concerted attacks undertaken presumptuously without sufficient means can be resisted and repulsed: — Still this must be done with caution, that the resources, for a future exertion, the defence of Quebec, may be unexhausted.⁸

Prevost would have been shocked had he known how little planning there was in Washington, either before or after a sharply divided Congress had made possible President Madison's declaration of War on June 19, 1812. The general view was that Canada could be had for the marching. Yet the United States Army had an actual strength of only 6,744 regulars, despite the large increases recently authorized by Congress. There were the sizable state militias, but these were untrained and many questioned

⁷ C.O. 42/136, Gore to Craig, Jan. 5, 1808.

⁸ C.O. 42/146, Prevost to Liverpool, May 18, 1812.

whether they could legally be sent beyond the borders of their respective states.⁹

News of war reached Quebec on June 25th. Prevost immediately cancelled the scheduled sailing of the 41st Foot to England and the 100th Foot to Halifax. The regular infantry in Lower Canada was concentrated in front of Montreal. The recently organized four battalions of Select Embodied Militia joined them. Garrison duty at Quebec and Montreal was, for the moment, left to local sedentary militia units.

Lord Bathurst's despatch of August 10th put the stamp of approval on Prevost's policy. Although the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies hoped that war with the United States could be brought to an end, Prevost was to do the best he could with what men and munitions could be spared him. "Your own Military Experience and local information will make you the best judge of the mode in which those means can be applied with the greatest Prospect of ultimate success", Bathurst wrote. "It is sufficient for me to express my concurrence in the general Principles upon which you intend to conduct operations, by making the Defence of Quebec paramount to every other consideration, should the Threat of Invasion be put into Execution".¹⁰

Tension eased somewhat when the enemy failed to appear on the borders of Lower Canada. The two replacement regiments and small reinforcement drafts for other British regiments were, however, the only augmentation of regulars possible before the spring of 1813. Even this "scanty reinforcement", Prevost wrote Brock, did not look as well in the flesh as on paper, since the 103rd Regiment was composed of "about 750 very young Soldiers and Boys."¹¹ In an earlier letter he had emphasized the merits of a defensive strategy:

Our numbers would not justify offensive operations being undertaken, unless they were solely calculated to strengthen a defensive attitude — I consider it prudent and politic to avoid any measure which can in its effect, have a tendency to unite the People in the American States. — Whilst dissension prevails among them, their attempts on these Provinces will be feeble; — it is therefore our duty carefully to avoid committing any act, which may, even by construction, tend to unite the Eastern and Southern States, unless by its perpetration, we are to derive a considerable and important advantage.¹²

By the simple expedient of not forwarding troops to Upper Canada, Prevost hoped to ensure that Brock might not attempt anything rash. During the entire campaigning season of 1812, and despite repeated

⁹ James Ripley Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army 1783-1812* (Princeton, 1947), 380-381.

¹⁰ P.R.O., C.O. 43/23, Bathurst to Prevost, Aug. 10, 1812.

¹¹ Public Archives of Canada, Upper Canada Sundries, 1812, Prevost to Brock, July 27, 1812.

¹² P.A.C., Brock Papers, Prevost to Brock, July 10, 1812.

requests for reinforcements, less than 500 regulars were sent to join the 1,500 troops scattered about Upper Canada.¹³

Initially Brock agreed that the weakness of his garrisons prevented him from taking the offensive.¹⁴ Brock's letters to Captain Charles Roberts at Fort St. Joseph vacillated, but finally authorized him to use his own discretion about attacking Michilimackinac.¹⁵ News of Roberts' capture of its American garrison, which had not heard about the declaration of war, encouraged Brock to undertake the reduction of Detroit. The result was another bloodless victory. The western Indians were now convinced that the British meant business and the inhabitants of Upper Canada were encouraged to think that a successful defence of that province was possible.

Upon receipt of word that the controversial British Orders-in-Council had been suspended, Prevost had sent his Adjutant General, Colonel Edward Baynes, to conclude an armistice with General Dearborn. This elderly political general seems to have agreed with Prevost's view that the United States would not now persist in war and he consented to a cessation of hostilities pending a reference to Washington. "I am enabled", Prevost reported to Bathurst, "to improve & augment my resources against an Invasion, whilst the Enemy distracted by Party broils & intrigues are obliged to remain supine & to witness daily the diminution of the Force they had so much difficulty in collecting."¹⁶ The confidential study later prepared for the Duke of Wellington demolished the arguments of Prevost's critics:

It has been said that General Brock, after his return to the Niagara frontier, on the 24th August, might have immediately taken Fort Niagara, which would have had the happiest effects upon the campaign, if not upon the war. General Brock's force was not more than 1,200 men upon the Niagara River, one-half of whom were militia. The Americans had 6,300. Offensive operations were, therefore, not likely to have been undertaken by the British. The capture of the fort at Niagara could not, moreover, at any rate, even if it had taken place, have prevented the Americans from passing the Niagara, above the Falls, between the Chippeway and Fort Erie, or below the Falls, from Lewis Town to Queen's Town. In fact, it would, in General Brock's possession, have been rather an inconvenience, compelling him to deprive himself of 300 or 400 men from his already too small disposable force for its garrison. In defensive warfare, delay is everything. The war was essentially defensive on the part of the British.¹⁷

¹³ A. M. J. Hyatt, *The Defence of Upper Canada in 1812* (Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1961), 124-125.

¹⁴ P.A.C., C/676, Brock to Prevost, July 3, 1812.

¹⁵ C/676, Roberts to Brock, July 12 and 17, 1812.

¹⁶ C.O. 42/147, Prevost to Bathurst, Aug. 24, 1812.

¹⁷ Maj.-Gen. Sir James Carmichael-Smyth, *Precis of the Wars in Canada, from 1755 to the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. With Military and Political Reflections* (London, 1862), 141-142.

Despite the open hostility of New England and other Federalist strongholds to the war, the United States persisted in being a belligerent. The armistice was not ratified and hostilities were resumed early in September. The resounding victory over the Americans at Queenston Heights on October 13th, however, ensured the safety of the Niagara peninsula for the balance of 1812. Dearborn's much-heralded advance against Montreal fizzled out on November 23rd, after his militia refused to enter Lower Canada.

The emphasis placed by Prevost on maintaining command of the Great Lakes caused the British Government to put the Admiralty in charge of naval operations for 1813, and sent Captain Sir James Yeo to Upper Canada. Although Prevost's strength was to be almost doubled by the despatch of one cavalry regiment and seven infantry regiments to Canada, the enemy could be expected to increase at a still greater rate during 1813. Hence the relevancy of the opinion expressed by the then Marquess of Wellesley in a letter written to Bathurst from Portugal:

I am very glad to find that you are going to reinforce Sir G. Prevost, and I only hope that troops will go in time; and that Sir George will not be induced by any hopes of trifling advantages to depart from a strong defensive system. He may depend upon it that he will not be strong enough either in men or means, to establish himself in any conquest he might make. The attempt would only weaken him, and his losses augment the spirits and hopes of the enemy, even if not attended by worse consequences; whereas by the other system, he will throw the difficulties and risk upon them, and they will most probably be foiled.¹⁸

Following the American capture and burning of York in late April, Prevost hastened to Upper Canada. He wrote Bathurst:

"The growing discontent & undissembled dissatisfaction of the Mass of the People of Upper Canada, have compelled me for the preservation of that Province to bring forward my best and reserved Soldiers to enable me to support the positions we hold on the Niagara and Detroit Frontier. I have been also induced to adopt this measure from the further consideration that the Militia have been considerably weakened by the frequent desertion of even the well disposed part of them to their farms, for the purpose of getting seed into the ground before the short summer of this Country has too far advanced."¹⁹

Intelligence received by Prevost at Kingston on May 26th that Commodore Chauncey's fleet was once again absent from Sacket's Harbor was too good an opportunity to miss for creating a diversion. Had the landing of the troops from Sir James Yeo's vessels not been delayed by an off-shore wind, success might have been achieved. As it was, the

¹⁸ Lieut. Colonel Gurwood (comp.), *The Dispatches of Field Marshal The Duke of Wellington, during his various campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, The Low Countries, and France, from 1799 to 1818* (London, 1838), X, 108.

¹⁹ C.O. 42/150, Prevost to Bathurst, May 26, 1813.

defenders of Sacket's Harbor received some reinforcement and a doughty new commander in Major-General Jacob Brown of the New York militia. Prevost's decision that the attack against the forts could not succeed and that withdrawal was indicated ²⁰ is supported by General Brown's despatch. "Had not General Prevost retreated most rapidly under the guns of his vessels", Brown wrote, "he would never have returned to Kingston." ²¹

Prevost complained in a despatch of June 23rd.

"The support I have received from the General Officers in Command since the death of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, I am sorry to say has not always corresponded with my expectations. Circumstances indicating an insufficiency on the part of Major-General Sir R. H. Sheaffe to the arduous task of defending Upper Canada, have induced me to place Major-General De Rottenburg in the Military Comd and Civil administration of that province... except Sir John Sherbrooke [in Nova Scotia] the Major-General is the only General Officer of high character and established reputation serving in the Army in the North American Provinces, to whom I could entrust this important duty, without embarrassing myself with it to the prejudice of the other possessions of His Majesty committed to my care." ²²

Prevost's situation was not helped by the fact that he was younger than Generals de Rottenburg, Sheaffe and Sherbrooke. The responsibility of command also made for loneliness in an otherwise "amiable, well-intentioned and honest" administrator.²³ There was, of course, every reason to deal harshly with Major-General Henry Procter. After command of Lake Erie was lost to the Americans on September 10, the Detroit frontier had to be abandoned, but Procter's conduct of the battle near the Moraviantown was inexcusable. Fortunately, mismanagement and timidity continued in the American higher command. The two-pronged thrust towards Montreal evaporated after General Wade Hampton's advanced guard was defeated at Chateaugay on October 26th and General Wilkinson's army suffered a comparable reverse at Crysler's Farm on November 11. Continued pressure in the Niagara Peninsula by a reinforced British force under a new commander, Lieutenant-General Gordon Drummond, forced American withdrawal before the end of the year.

Early 1814 again found the Americans without any well-conceived plan for offensive operations. As a direct consequence of the defeat and abdication of Napoleon in April, nearly 13,000 British troops were ordered to Canada. Bathurst's secret instructions of June 3rd stated that

²⁰ P.R.O., W.O. 1/96, Prevost to York, June 1, 1813.

²¹ Brown to Armstrong, June 1, 1813 is printed in Franklin B. Hough, *A History of Jefferson County in the State of New York, from the earliest period to the present time* (Albany, 1854), 490-491.

²² C/1220, Prevost to York, June 23, 1813.

²³ *Dictionary of National Biography*.

this augmentation would enable Prevost to undertake offensive operations before the campaigning season of 1814 ended:

At the same time it is by no means the intention of His Majesty's Government to encourage such forward movements into the interior of the American Territory as might commit the safety of the Force placed under your command. The object of your operations will be; first, to give immediate protection; secondly, to obtain if possible ultimate security of His Majesty's Possessions in America. The entire destruction of Sackett's harbour and the Naval Establishments on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain come under the first description.²⁴

Subsequent occupation of the Niagara and Detroit areas would ensure the second.

On June 21st Drummond wrote Prevost, requesting reinforcements to meet an American threat building up along the Niagara frontier and suggesting that the enemy would be unlikely to attempt anything from Plattsburgh. "Very much obliged to Genl. D. for his opinion", Prevost scribbled on the letter; "unfortunately for him it is not founded on fact as not one soldier intended for U.C. has been prevented moving forward by the Enemy's Demonstrations in the vicinity of Odle Town".²⁵ [sic]

On July 12th Prevost replied to Bathurst that the Americans would possess naval superiority on Lake Ontario until September, when H.M.S. *St. Lawrence* of 102-guns would be completed at Kingston. He was sending three regiments to aid Drummond in Upper Canada. Had reinforcements arrived a month or six weeks earlier, while Yeo's fleet still had the naval advantage on Lake Ontario, it would have been possible to prevent the American advance into the Niagara peninsula. (This would have made unlikely the hard-fought engagement at Lundy's Lane on July 25th). So soon as the whole reinforcement arrived from Europe, Prevost would implement his secret instructions. Until complete naval command was obtained over Lakes Ontario and Champlain, however, he would have to remain on the defensive.²⁶

The British Government's belief that a force of British regulars from Kingston could overwhelm Sacket's Harbor from the landward side and secure naval superiority on Lake Ontario by destroying Chauncey's base,²⁷ while his fleet remained in being, was absurd. It also conveniently ignored the problem of how the troops were to pass over the intervening water obstacle. On the other hand, Plattsburgh could be reached by an army marching on foot from the frontier of Lower Canada. Therefore, Prevost began to move forward on August 31st, despite the fact that work-

²⁴ C.O. 43/23, Bathurst to Prevost, June 3, 1814.

²⁵ C/683, Drummond to Prevost, June 21, 1813.

²⁶ C.O. 42/157, Prevost to Bathurst, July 12, 1814.

²⁷ *Supplementary Despatches, Correspondence, and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington*, K.G. Edited by his son, The Duke of Wellington (London, 1862), IX, 221, 267 and 290.

men were still completing the new flagship of Captain George Downie's accompanying naval squadron. Even without his three brigades of Peninsular War veterans, Prevost's force outnumbered the American garrison of Plattsburgh. He would, however, have been wiser to have remained in Montreal and delegated command to a subordinate more experienced on the field of battle. After hounding Downie into action for a supposed combined operation on September 11th, Prevost kept his army idle while the British ships were battered into submission in Plattsburgh Bay.²⁸ Since there was nothing to stop the American fleet sailing up Lake Champlain to Burlington, if the British did capture Plattsburgh, further operations would be pointless. "Under the circumstances", Prevost reported to Bathurst, "I had to determine whether I should consider my own Fame by gratifying the Ardor of the Troops in persevering in the attack, or consult the more substantial interests of my Country by withdrawing the Army which was yet uncrippled for the security of these Provinces".²⁹

The retreating Peninsular veterans had not been happy about being sent to fight in a mere colonial war, under a general who had made his reputation in the West Indies, instead of being allowed to enjoy life in an army of occupation or some leave at home. Officers had been further alienated by petty matters. The otherwise strict Wellington had never worried about "fancible" attire being worn on active service, but a General Order of August 23rd had made Senior Officers responsible that the "Established Uniforms of their Corps" were "strictly observed by the Officers under their Command."³⁰

"It is very obvious to me that you must remove Sir George Prevost", Wellington wrote Bathurst on October 30. "I see he is gone to war about trifles with the general officers I sent him, which are certainly the best of their rank in the army; and his subsequent failure and distresses will be aggravated by that circumstance; and will probably with the usual fairness of the public be attributed to it".³¹ Although Wellington had no objection to going to North America, he felt that his services could be better utilized in Europe. His letter of November 9 to the Prime Minister is most interesting :

That which appears to be wanting in America is not a General, or General Officers and troops, but a naval superiority on the Lakes. Till that superiority is acquired, it is impossible, according to my notion, to maintain an army in such a situation as to keep the enemy out of the whole frontier, much less to make any conquest from the enemy,

²⁸ See account in Captain A. T. Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* (London, 1905), II.

²⁹ C.O. 42/157, Prevost to Bathurst, Sept. 22, 1814.

³⁰ Copy in P.A.C.

³¹ *Historical Manuscripts Commission. Report on the Manuscripts of Earl Bathurst, preserved at Cirencester Park* (London, 1923), 302.

which, with those superior means, might, with reasonable hopes of success, be undertaken. I may be wrong in this opinion, but I think the whole history of the war proves its truth The question is, whether we can acquire this naval superiority on the Lakes. If we can't, I shall do you but little good in America; and I shall go there only to prove the truth of Prevost's defence, and to sign a peace which might as well be signed now

Considering every thing, it is my opinion that the war has been a most successful one, and highly honourable to the British arms; but from particular circumstances, such as the want of the naval superiority on the Lakes, you have not been able to carry it into the enemy's territory, notwithstanding your military success, and now undoubted military superiority, and have not even cleared your own territory of the enemy on the point of attack [Fort Erie and Fort Malden]. You cannot, then, on any principle of equality in negotiation, claim a cession of territory [northern Maine, Fort Niagara and Fort Michilimackinac] excepting in exchange for other advantages which you have in your power.³²

Wellington's views found acceptance. The Treaty signed at Ghent on Christmas Eve, 1814, restored the territorial *status quo ante bellum*. Prevost's conduct of the war received official approval,³³ but his recall had already been deemed necessary to placate public opinion.

³² *Supplementary Despatches*, *op. cit.*, 425-426.

³³ *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the year 1814* (London, 1815), 191. See also *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, LXXXVII, Pt. 1 (London, 1817), 83.