

Piratical Doings on the River St. Clair 1838 by John Carter

Dennis Carter-Edwards

Volume 114, Number 2, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092222ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092222ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Carter-Edwards, D. (2022). Review of [*Piratical Doings on the River St. Clair 1838* by John Carter]. *Ontario History*, 114(2), 256–259.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1092222ar>

ries of the Algonquin nation. In this story of Mackay and Ottawa, Algonquin people appear mostly as background characters, who are primarily used to add texture to the narrative with descriptions such as the “chants of the Algonquin people” (16) and “the drumming of the Algonquins” (202). There is a brief mention of the Algonquins’ concerns about the encroachment of settlers on their hunting grounds in the 1820s, but the book would have benefitted from further consideration of Mackay’s role in the colonial dispossession of land in the founding of Ottawa.

Sweeny has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the early

history of Ottawa and provided a portrait of one of the key men involved in founding the city. His research on the use of Spanish silver from the Napoleonic Wars to pay for the building of the Rideau Canal adds an important transnational dimension to local history. Readers looking for an informative and engaging narrative of Mackay and the early history of Ottawa will find it in this book. Readers seeking analysis of Mackay’s colonial legacy and source material for further research may find the book less useful.

Sarah Dougherty
Historical Researcher, Know History

Piratical Doings on the River St. Clair 1838

By John Carter

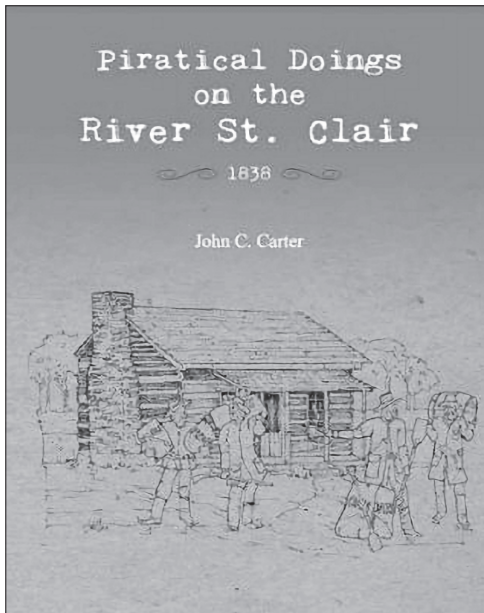
Heritage St. Clair 2020, 227 pages. \$45.00 Soft Cover ISBN 978-1-7772622-0-4 (<https://sombramuseumshop.square.site/>)

“I ran immediately up to the fellow determined to bayonet him but found the fire of Colonel Harvell had done its fatal work . . . for a moment a sudden thrill of horror passed over me as I watched the fellow gasping for breath in the last agonies of death.”

So wrote Jedediah Hunt Jr., an American sympathizer of the Canadian rebels who participated in one of the many Patriot attacks on the Western District in the Upper Canada Rebellion in 1838 describing the death of a Canadian militiamen defending Canadian soil during one of these marauding raids. It is these “piratical doings” that are the subject of John Carter’s latest publication on the Upper Canadian rebellions and their aftermath, with a focus on the hitherto sparse accounts of the raids in the River St. Clair region. The inspiration for this book was a presentation by

the author at the Sombra museum. Local historian Al Anderson responded enthusiastically to the talk and, with the support of Heritage St. Clair, formed a partnership with Dr. Carter to flesh out the story and publish the results.

The finished product, *Piratical Doings on the River St. Clair Some Reflections on the 1838 Upper Canadian Rebellion* is much more than a recounting of the Sombra raid of June 1838. Through an impressive review of contemporary newspapers in North America and abroad, personal diaries, official correspondence, both American and British, muster rolls, militia orders and private letters, the author set the stage for the assembling of American sympathizers for the failed 1837 Rebellion into a so called “Patriot Army” in Michigan that kept the Detroit River region in a state of heightened tension as the risk of



armed conflict prevailed. That threat was met with varying degrees of military preparedness on both sides of the border. The author highlights the measures taken by American authorities to thwart any such attacks by its citizens as well as the Canadian response by the deployment of local militia and British regulars. This apprehension was well justified. As the author notes, there were at least fourteen incursions from the United States into Canada. Several of these raids occurred along the Western District, beginning with a naval assault on Amherstburg in January 1838 followed by attacks on Fighting Island, Pelee Island, four incursions on the River St. Clair district, and finally an attack on the town of Windsor in December 1838.

The specifics of the raids on the River St. Clair proved challenging to piece together. As the author noted, few accounts of the actual attacks survived. What he was able to glean from a few diary references, correspondence and newspaper accounts was both contradictory and incomplete.

On 26 June 1838 a sizeable force attacked the town of Goderich and plundered shops before they were repulsed by local militia. Estimates of the size of this raiding party varied widely from three hundred to less than a hundred. At the same time, another raiding party landed at Nugent's Inn (today the site of Port Lambton) and raised the Patriot flag, a blue, white, and red tri-colour with two stars representing Upper and Lower Canada and a crescent representing the Hunters' Lodges.

On the morning of the 28 June, a band of what one correspondent called "pirate robbers," numbering somewhere between 25 and 50 men, seized a private schooner and sailed from Palmer, Michigan to the small coastal village of Sombra. After landing, they plundered a general store kept by local Justice of the Peace Claude Govin (Govin) then proceeded to the commissariat depot stealing more provisions and taking two occupants, Captain Macdonald and a local tanner, Angus McDonald as prisoners. They then made their escape. According to one account, they were pursued across the river by a party of Moore Township militiamen and Indigenous warriors. The vessel ran aground near the American shore and the occupants landed, though whether they exchanged fire with the militia and warriors is unclear. The potential of Canadian soldiers fighting American citizens on American soil was fraught with international implications and could have further inflamed an already tense relationship between the two countries. However, American authorities arrived, captured some of the rebels and returned the stolen goods. The fate of those captured was noted in the local newspapers, the Canadian press observing that "as these crimes were perpetrated under the name of patriotism and liberty and rebellion, it is very probable the criminals will be pardoned." (*Montreal*

Herald 14 October 1838, 56) *The Detroit Free Press* countered that “most, if not all, the crew were Canadians.” (55)

A more serious attack occurred late in the evening of 28 June when a party of rebels attacked the home of a Mr. Lick, situated near Wallaceburg. During a skirmish, they shot and killed Captain William Kerry of the local militia then made their escape. The alleged culprit was Colonel William Putnam formerly from London, Upper Canada. William Lyon Mackenzie’s son commented on this incident but suggested that the militia thought rebels were in the house while militia in the house thought rebels were attacking and Kerry was killed in the exchange of friendly fire.

These incidents highlight many of the challenges in documenting this period in the history of the Western District, indeed of the whole post rebellion activities. Wildly exaggerated accounts of the size of the rebel force, the apparently inability or unwillingness of American authorities to apprehend these armed bands of men who openly avowed their intent of invading Canada, the uncertain loyalty of the resident population, especially those of French extraction, the concern that the Indigenous population might remain neutral and the sheer lack of reliable information confounded military planners at the time and historians of today. The significant Black population in and around Amherstburg actively took part in efforts to defend the community but how they were perceived by both military authorities and the Patriots is not discussed in the book. While Carter hints at these broader themes, he does not pursue them in detail. Nor does the book analyze the various militia organizations, beginning with the volunteer call up of the sedentary militia in the winter of 1837-1838 through to their demobilization in the summer of 1838 and then recall

in the fall and winter of 1838-1839, both as more formally Incorporated Militia with proper uniforms, weapons and training and then as Provisional Battalions for a two-year term. In addition, the conflict between Sir George Arthur and Sir John Colborne over how best to deploy limited military resources was reminiscent of the conflict between Sir Isaac Brock and Sir George Prevost in the War of 1812 over whether to defend border regions or concentrate troops at central locations. The formulation of a military strategy to respond to the military threat constitutes another critical theme in understanding this period and is noted in passing. Nor does the study provide detailed analysis of what happened to the men who were caught during these raids by the American or Canadian authorities. There are notations of a few individuals who were tried and sent to the penal colony in Australia which is familiar territory for the author who has researched and written extensively on this topic.

These, however, are minor quibbles since the book had not set out to be a comprehensive account of rebel activities along the Western District and the British response. Rather, it presents a more fulsome account of the incidents along the St. Clair River while providing a broader and more informed context to understand these raids. The book has eighteen detailed appendices that provide more information on various aspects of the period. One of the real strengths of the book is the comprehensive biographical sketches of many of the key players discussed along with numerous, high quality, colour portraits that makes the book an enjoyable read. There are over one-hundred period images that help bring these individuals to life. In addition, there is original art work by local artist Paul Smith. The bibliography con-

tains some 830 titles which makes this an invaluable source for anyone interested in the Rebellion period along with a comprehensive index. Sadly, Al Anderson passed away before the book was published but the end product is a suitable tribute to a local historian who recognized the neces-

sity of telling stories of importance to the community. All proceeds of the sale of the book will support projects undertaken by Heritage St. Clair.

Dennis Carter-Edwards
Peterborough, Ontario

The Heart of Toronto
Corporate Power, Civic Activism, and
the Remaking of Downtown Yonge Street

By Daniel Ross

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2022. 240 pages. Paperback \$32.95.
ISBN: 9780774867016 (<https://www.ubcpress.ca/>)

Daniel Ross' *Heart of Toronto* is a much-needed analysis of a critical aspect of downtown Toronto's postwar development. His clear, engaging writing and concise analysis brings to light important aspects of downtown Yonge Street's twentieth-century development not previously analyzed or contextualized to the extent that Ross provides. Across the five chapters of his book, Ross selects key themes and issues related to specific attempts to remake downtown Yonge Street (comprising, generally, the street from Lake Shore Boulevard north to College Street). He makes it clear that there is much to unpack from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s concerning the understanding of Yonge Street's place and role within Toronto: "Variously understood as a historic landscape and an embarrassing relic, a

transportation route and a people place, a laboratory for modernist urbanism and a haven for big-city sleaze, it was the centre of efforts to reinvent downtown to keep pace with, or even lead, urban change." (4) But what did urban change mean to the era's engaged citizens, politicians, business owners, and others? Ross makes it clear that there is also much to unpack about the motivations among this cast of actors, who "used, debated, and ultimately remade downtown Yonge, spanning a period from the 1950s through the 1970s when the street was seldom out of the news." (4)

Ross' *Heart of Toronto* is successful because he keeps the focus tight to his key subjects and themes. Each chapter "pays attention to the ways in which debates over the street intersected with and were influenced

