

LAURA SECORD
A Study In Canadian Patriotism.

by
George Bryce

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A STUDY IN CANADIAN PATRIOTISM

LAURA SECORD

Being an Address Delivered Before the Canadian
Club, of Winnipeg, May 1st, 1907

BY

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LAURA SECORD,
Born 1775, Died 1868.

LAURA SECORD

A Study in Canadian Patriotism

Rev. Dr. Bryce was the guest of the Canadian Club at their luncheon yesterday afternoon, and delivered an address on the gallant deed of Laura Secord, the heroine of 1812. A personal touch, as Professor Osborne, the chairman, remarked, was lent to the occasion by the presence at the luncheon of Mrs. Cockburn, a grand-daughter of Laura Secord.

Like the Rhenish frontier of Alsace and Lorraine, the banks of the Niagara river have for several centuries been the debatable land—the scene of conflict in North America. Long before the coming of the White man, Iroquois and Hurons; Sioux and Ojibways; Eries and Caughnawagas regarded the Niagara peninsula as the march-land between east and west. Its backbone of Burlington heights, the great gorge of Niagara, and its contiguous lakes Erie and Ontario gave scope for strategic movements in war far exceeding the plains of Flanders.

After New York had been taken possession of by the English, and Canada by the French, from the time of Frontenac, till the taking of Quebec by Wolfe—three quarters of a century—the roar of cannon joined with that of the great cataract in border conflict, and the fort at the mouth of the river was alternately English and French.

If during the revolutionary war it was not the scene of combat, it was because Upper Canada was still a wilderness, but within five years of the treaty of Paris in 1783, the whole Niagara frontier bristled with the bayonets of Butler's Rangers and other loyalists who had turned against the revolting colonies.

In 1812 it was the field of the most sanguinary and determined conflicts which occurred during that, our great war of defence. Everyone has heard of the burning of the Caroline in the 1837 rebellion, while in the Fenian raid of 1866 the chief attack on Canada was made by the Irish patriots along the Niagara river.

To the speaker, born within seventy miles of the Niagara river, it has ever seemed the land of romance, as thoroughly as the Scottish and English border land was to the Percys and Douglasses. As a boy it was my joy to visit the monument of the illustrious Brock on Queenston heights, to wander through the graveyard which was the centre of the battle of Lundy's Lane, and to end the ramble by standing transfixed at the sight of the great cataract with its "voice of many waters." In later years the opportunity as a volunteer was afforded me of studying the region of Fort Erie to Niagara on-the-Lake, and of taking part in driving back the invaders of our sacred soil. The memory of dear comrades, men of my own college year whom I saw fall in the fight, will never be effaced.

It is to this region of story and romance, that I would, at your own request, call the attention of the Canadian Club—a society which I understand, exists to keep before us the traditions, achievements, higher interests and brilliant future of our native land.

A WARLIKE ERA

However much we may deprecate war, and with all its "pomp and circumstance" it is a hateful thing and a blot on our civilization, yet we cannot fail to see that it is a great school for developing character and bringing out many of the brightest virtues of humanity. Ruskin has gone so far as to say, that "all great nations learned their truth of word and strength of thought in war; that they were nourished in war, and wasted by peace; trained by war and betrayed by peace;—in a word, that they were born in war and expired in peace."

We agree that hardship, enforced effort, anxiety and fear, danger and even poverty itself may be the environment in which the meaner tendencies of men are corrected, and by which the manly and humane virtues all too rare are cultivated and established.

Our theme to-day, as illustrative of this principle is that of a man and wife, who gained renown nearly a hundred years ago—especially of her, who, while to use the authorized language we call the "weaker vessel," was yet I suspect supreme in her courage, quick vision, and endurance of these twain. These are Laura Ingersoll, and her husband Capt. James Secord.

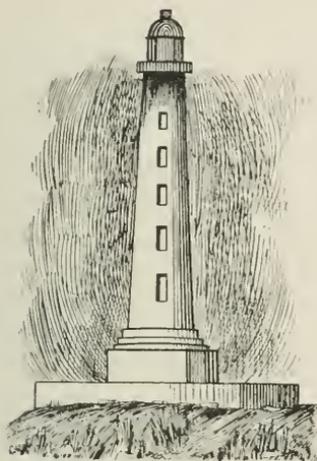
They were both born under the British flag in the old colonial days, he in New Jersey in 1773, and she in Massachusetts in 1775. That was an important era in which to be born in the old British colonies. The old stargazers used to say that the character of each individual was formed by the star whether auspicious or malign, which was in the ascendant when he or she was

born. Whether that be true or not, to be born in a time of political unrest, in a time of civil war, in a time of constant danger and surprise, and to have this the predominant feature in their lives, as was from their birth till the end of the century—well night thirty years must surely have produced a strength, a resource, a wariness, and a determination of the most remarkable kind.

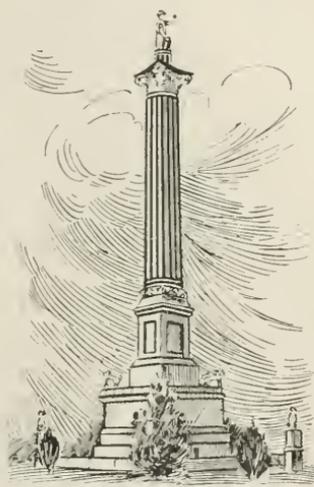
A HEROIC STOCK

Besides they were both of "earth's best blood." James Secord was a descendant of the Marquis de Sicard of the reign of Louis XII of France. The family of the Marquis became Huguenots, in the time of the great

QUEENSTON HEIGHTS



First Brock's Monument,
Blown Up in 1840.



Second Brock's Monument.
1859-1907.

persecution of 1572, retired to England and in the following century five brothers Secord emigrated to New Jersey, where they founded New Rochelle, naming it from their estates confiscated near La Rochelle in France. After the revolutionary war, they came to New Brunswick. A part of the family journeyed west to Upper Canada, and James Secord settled on the Niagara frontier, as did also his brother David, after whom the village of St. David's was named. It is interesting to record that Sir Richard Cartwright's grandmother was a sister of James Secord.

Equally worthy of note was the family of Laura Ingersoll, James Secord's wife. The Ingesoll family came as Puritans from England, and settled in Salem, Massachusetts. A family descendant, Thomas Ingersoll and his family journeyed to Canada about 1793 on the invitation of Governor Simcoe, who was in the habit of receiving new settlers as they crossed the Niagara river: "Aye! Aye! I will give you land, you are tired of the Federal government. You like not any longer to have so many kings. Come along we love such good royalists as you are." True the Ingersolls had not been loyalists, but like tens of thousands of others they followed the loyalists to the new land. Ingersoll took on the Thames in Upper Canada—sixty-six thousand acres—undertaking to place a thousand settlers from New York upon it. On account, however, of the fear of encouraging so large an alien element, the Imperial government cancelled the agreement. Ingersoll was compelled to leave his great reserve and settled near Toronto. Already eighty or ninety families were on his grant, and the town of Ingersoll in Western Ontario commemorates him to this day. Laura was the eldest daughter of Thomas Ingersoll, and she was married to James Secord seemingly between 1795 and 1800, the date being uncertain.

The marriage contains the element of romance. James Secord was a determined loyalist. Thomas Ingersoll maintained that he had never been a loyalist. Feeling ran high on this subject in Canada. The loyalists rather despised the later settlers. To this fact may perhaps be traced the cancellation of Ingersoll's grant. But as in the case of the Montagues and Capulets in "Romeo and Juliet" it was shown that "Love laughs at locksmiths," and can beat down even what are stronger than stonewalls—the barriers of race, caste, politics, or creed. Accordingly being loyal to one another, to God, and truth, they made their truce an everlasting one. But how? Laura Secord became a loyalist—a greater loyalist and patriot than her husband ever was.

No brighter name shines forth in Canadian annals than that of the heroine of Queenston Heights and Beaver Dams—this young Canadian woman.

THEIR FAME

While it may be said that our Canadian literature has not done justice to our National life and our national heroes, yet the name of Laura Secord has received no inconsiderable attention from our Canadian writers. Mrs. S. A. Curzon has given us a drama and a ballad also, in which the story of the heroine of 1812 is graphically and imaginatively told. Mrs. L. A. Currie of

St. Catherines, has presented us with a very readable book entitled "The story of Laura Secord," while Miss M. A. Fitzgibbon, the granddaughter of Lieut. Fitzgibbon, who received the important message which Laura Secord carried, has written in her "A veteran of 1812" a characterization of this brave woman in every way admirable. Miss Agnes Machar (Fidelis), Mr. John Reade, of Montreal, and Dr. Jackeway, of Ontario, have supplied us with Canadian lyrics of this heroic woman. Furthermore, the poet of our own western prairies, who is also the author of "Tecumseh," has written "A ballad for brave women" worthily describing her deed of valour for the empire. To all these we are indebted, and almost every "History of Canada," which we have, has given the same note as Mr. G. C. D. Roberts, poet and historian, "The name of Laura Secord, has been written high among those of Canada's heroines."

QUEENSTON HEIGHTS

The wanton and unjust attack made on Canada by the United States, in what is known as the "War of 1812" was by no means a unanimous movement among the Americans. To their credit be it said, that the New England States of Connecticut and Massachusetts, as well as the State of New Jersey, protested against this war in their legislatures, and largely hampered the war party. It is worthy of note that no attack was made on the British provinces east of Lake Champlain.

In British North America, French and English—Loyalist and settler—Nova Scotian and Upper Canadian were a unit in their resistance to the wrong. Though Upper Canada was then, small and weak, having in it only 1,450 British regulars and 2,000 militia, yet on its long and dangerous frontier it showed the noblest heroism.

Sir Isaac Brock, a noted British officer was Acting-Governor and Commander in chief. He was the hero of the hour. The battle of Queenston Heights on October 13, 1812, was a fierce and bloody conflict. The Americans gained the Heights from the Niagara river, and though the victory was to be a glorious one for Canada, in the first attack in the morning we lost Brock.

This was Canada's first real baptism of fire. In this attack James Secord, who had until just before the war been a Captain in the Lincoln militia, was present as a volunteer. He was one of those who carried the body of Brock to the rear. Later in the day a second attack was made, and in it fell Col. Macdonell, a young Highlander from Glengarry, the very flower of the young Canadian leaders.

But the Canadians held the enemy, who were on the top of the hill unable

to escape, and Gen. Sheaffe made a flank attack by way of St. David's, and as the result of his movement the main body of his opponents was taken prisoner. Though Sheaffe was victorious, yet a number of his men had fallen, being shot from the Heights. Among these was James Secord, who was wounded badly in the leg and shoulder, and who lay on the hillside helpless. Laura Secord was an anxious spectator of the fight, and on being told of her husband's fate rushed, regardless of danger, to his side on the hill. Just as she reached the spot three American soldiers ran forward with uplifted gun stocks to club the wounded man to death. She threw herself in their way, but they persisted in their original intention, and were only stopped by the arrival of one of their officers, Captain Wool. He called them cowards, put them under a guard, and sent them across the river to Lewiston, where they were court martialled and imprisoned. The officer then sent the wounded man to his own house, which was within their lines. This was the first great exploit of this daring Canadian woman.

Canadians have always remembered the heroes of Queenston Heights.

“No tongue need blazon forth their fame,
 The cheers that stir the sacred hill
 Are but mere promptings of the will
 That conquered then, that conquers still,
 And generations yet shall thrill
 At Brock's remembered name.”—Sangster.

THE SECOND YEAR

Events on the Niagara peninsula were still more deadly and more alarming in the second year of the war, 1813:

The little Canadian army could not be greatly increased, but now thousands crossed the lines to overwhelm it. The Americans held the river and Fort George, where now stands Niagara-on-the-lake. The Canadian success at Michilimackinac and Detroit in the west in 1812, was now threatened with extinction in 1813. Proctor and Tecumseh were beleaguered by Gen. Harrison and his Kentucky wild riders. From both the Niagara and the Detroit rivers the outlook was alarming. The rival fleets on Lake Ontario gained alternate advantages.

Suddenly a remarkable Canadian success was gained by the night attack of Col. Harvey at Stony Creek, just at the moment when the Canadian cause in Western Canada was thought to be at its last gasp.

Col. Harvey, with seven hundred and fifty men, fell upon the American camp asleep, took the Generals Chandler and Winder, the guns and stores, one

hundred men, and let upwards of two thousand of the enemy flee back to their defences in Fort George and Queenston.

It was a famous victory!

The whole Niagara district was now in an evil way. British sentries or American pickets might be stumbled on anywhere. Life and property were utterly unsafe. The Secord house was within the American lines at Queens-



Map of Niagara District (Beaver Dams Are at Thorold).

ton. It was a dangerous spot at such a time, but Laura Secord was full of courage. Mrs. Curzon tells the story that three American soldiers called at her house asking for water. One of them said, "When we come for good to this country we'll divide the land, and I'll take this place for my share." Mrs. Secord was nettled and hastily replied, "You scoundrel, all you'll ever get here will be six feet of earth." After their departure she felt somewhat sorry for the abrupt answer she had given. Two days after the message was brought

her by the two survivors "You were right about the six feet of earth, missus." The third man had been killed.

Her shrewdness, courage, and decision of character are shown forth by other stories which are told of her.

THE GREAT EVENT

But in the leafy month of June, the great event of her life came. General Vincent, the British commander, had his headquarters near Hamilton, on Burlington Heights. His outposts were at the Twelve Mile Creek where St. Catherines now stands. Here Col. Bishopp's force was stationed. Several miles east toward the Niagara river on the public road was Col. de Haren's command, and Lieut. Fitzgibbon was stationed, with some thirty men, about seven or eight miles to the south on the Heights. Here were the stores and ammunition. Two hundred and fifty British Indians—Mohawks and Caughnawagas were encamped a few miles away, and these were led by William Johnson Ker, and young Dominique Ducharme.

The Americans were very anxious to wipe out the disgrace of Stony Creek. Strong reinforcements reached them. Fitzgibbon's activity annoyed the American generals, and they determined to dislodge or possibly capture him.

Laura Secord's opportunity was at hand.

At James Secord's house a number of American officers were billeted. On June 22, Colonel Boerstler, an American veteran with a high record, who was to command the expedition, came to dine with them and talk over the plan of campaign.

But a commander should be wise as well as brave. The attack was to be made within two days. "Fitzgibbon's position captured" said Boerstler, "Upper Canada is ours." Military critics who have since pronounced upon the matter say that he was correct.

Laura Secord was an interested listener.

The danger was imminent. Her country would be under the foot of the invader. Her blood boiled at the thought. But what could she do? Her husband was severely maimed. He could never entirely recover. Her four children needed her care.

But her patriotism urged her to action.

True she was in the lines of the Americans, but skill might extricate her. The dangers of the forest, of the lynx and wolf and serpent, were not to be overlooked. Her chief dread was of the Indians in their uncertain and ferocious temper.

But she was a woman of decision.

On one occasion the American soldiers had planned to rob her. She had a store of Spanish doubloons which she inherited and they knew it. She threw the coins into the blazing cauldron of water which hung over the blazing fire, and thus saved them.

She was a woman of few words, and with her husband's consent unwillingly given laid her plan.

She rose at early dawn on June 23. Although above the peasant garb which she assumed, yet without compunction she dressed in a short flannel skirt and cotton jacket, and without shoes and stockings started through the dewy herbage.

Though the story of her milkmaid dress is denied (the cow and milkpail being declared a fable) yet it is still believed. She sought her cow, the story goes, and secretly prodding it while pretending to milk it passed the American sentry. One report is that she carried a bunch of violets which she gave the sentry, but this seems somewhat apocryphal. Another explanation is that she gained permission to see her sick brother Charles who was at St. David's. But passion and inspiration find their own means, and she reached St. David's at sunrise. Her friends at St. David's dissuaded her, but it was useless. It is said that her niece Elizabeth Secord, accompanied her for seven miles by road until Twelve Mile Creek was reached, but could go no further. This seems unlikely as a letter signed by herself says that American sentries were ten miles out from Fort George. This made it necessary for her to leave the public road. She also desired to avoid De Haren's post, lest there she should be delayed. Through the tangle wood of the pristine forest she made her way. Mrs. Curzon has dramatically represented the meeting of Mrs. Secord with a rattlesnake, which she addressed "Is there no Eden that thou enviest not?" Again she is disturbed by the howling of the wolves, only to say:

Thank God not me they seek

Some other scent allures the ghoulish horde?

She believes herself to be the child of favorable destiny.

The British line was connected by sentries from De Haren's command at Twelve Mile Creek up to the Indian encampment, and this with Fitzgibbon at De Cew's house.

Footsore and discouraged after some ten miles of a circuit through the woods, she came upon a British sentry. To him, however, she was able to disclose her errand. He passed her on upon her journey, warning her of the Indians whom she would encounter.

These were her real fear.

Meanwhile she had to cross the swollen Twelve Mile Creek, and that more than once. According to her own story one of her greatest dangers was in crossing at one point on a hemlock log, slippery, with beneath it, the boiling torrent. This she could do only by crawling most slowly and carefully along it.

As she supposed she was approaching somewhat near her destination, suddenly she came upon the Indian camp. The moon was shining brightly. The red men were seated around fires in an opening in the forest, and had a weird and uncanny appearance. She approached them carefully, but they heard her. Covered with their war paint and decked with feathers, they rushed upon her thinking her to be a spy. "Woman! what does woman want?" they cried.

She was greatly terrified, but kept her self-possession. She explained her mission asking for the 'Big chief' and told them that the "Long knives" (the Americans) were coming. At length a chief Mishe-mo-qua conducted her through the beaver meadows to De Cew's. Here she met Fitzgibbon and gave her message which threw the camp into a fever—for only a few hours and the appointed time for Boerstler's foray would be upon them. Mrs. Curzon makes the heroine faint away. Some nineteen miles had she come on her circuitous route, and she was certainly worn out, but the more prosaic account states that she was taken to the farm beyond De Cew's where according to her own account she "slept right off."

"Braver deeds are not recorded
In historic treasuries hoarded
Than this march of Laura Secord
Through the forest long ago."

Dr. Jakeway.

It was not long till the Indian scouts came rushing in with the news that the "Long knives" were coming. They had taken the direct road, thus avoiding De Haren. This road which led along the brow of the height is now closed, between St. David's and Beaver Dams—Beaver Dams lay alongside the site of the town of Thorold of to-day.

BEAVER DAMS

Fitzgibbon was, however, prepared, with his little handful for the foe. Boerstler arrived about nine o'clock, and the action began at ten. The Indians were scattered here and there on the flanks of the Americans. They were invisible but kept up a deadly fire. As Boerstler approached the ravine the fire

became unbearable. He was wounded twice, his horse was shot under him, his men were falling on every side. Seeing he was beaten the American commander sought to retire, taking his guns with him, but he found himself surrounded and under a sniping fire.

Fitzgibbon had not yet been engaged. He had forty or fifty men, twelve of them dragoons who had joined him. Coming in sight of the conflict, he marched his troops round and round affecting to have a strong force.

Then happened what was one of the most picturesque and at the same time amusing events of the war.

Fitzgibbon sent out a flag of truce and summoned Boerstler to surrender, his only troublesome thought being what should his scanty handful of men do with so many prisoners.

But Boerstler's case was desperate. In negotiating with him Fitzgibbon referred with gravity to his uncontrollable Indians, and spoke of De Haren's and Bishopp's forces as if they were within call. Boerstler capitulated. We need not go into detail, suffice it to say that 25 officers and 519 rank and file laid down their arms, while the two guns, two ammunition wagons, with the colors of the 14th regiment of the United States army fell into his hands.

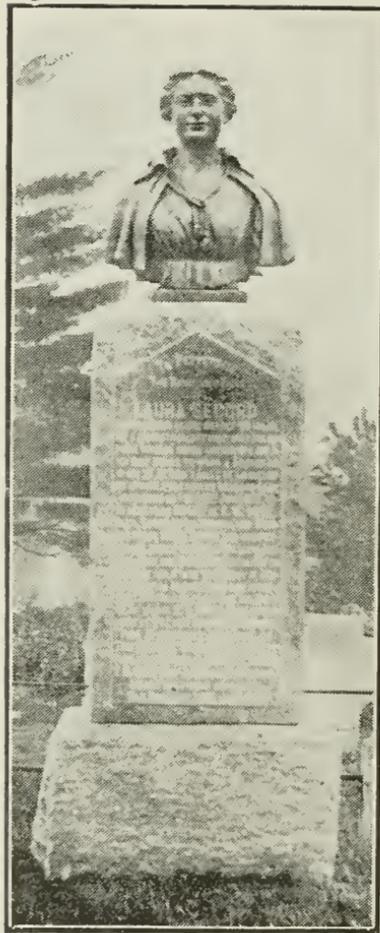
The victory was complete.

And this was certainly the result of Laura Secord's eventful journey. Returning home a short time after with the unconsciousness of true greatness, she thought she had done nothing beyond her duty, and set herself to her domestic affairs.

The names of Laura Secord and Fitzgibbon have thus become illustrious. True, envious tongues sought to detract from their greatness. Of Fitzgibbon we do not speak, more than to say that misrepresentation failed to rob him of his glory. So too, a jealous shaft was cast at Laura Secord, and it was denied that she had made the journey claimed.

With generous promptitude Fitzgibbon wrote the following letter:

"I do hereby certify that Mrs. Secord, the wife of James Secord, Esq. of Chippewa, (his latest residence) did in the month of June, 1813, walk from her house in the village of St. David's to Decamp's house in Thorold, by a circuitous route of about twenty miles, partly through the woods, to acquaint me that the enemy intended to attempt by surprise to capture a detachment of the 49th regiment, then under my command; she having obtained such knowledge from good authority, as the event proved. Mrs. Secord was a person of slight and delicate frame; and made the effort in weather excessively warm,



Monument Erected to Laura Secord
Over Her Grave in Lundy Lane
Burying Ground, 1901.

and I dreaded at the time that she must suffer in health in consequence of fatigue and anxiety, she having been exposed to danger from the enemy, through whose line of communication she had to pass. The attempt was made on my detachment by the enemy, this detachment, consisting of upwards of 500 men, with a field piece and fifty dragoons, was captured in consequence. I write this certificate in a moment of much hurry and from memory, and it is therefore thus brief.

(Signed) JAMES FITZGIBBON.

Formerly Lieutenant in the 49th Regiment.

LATER DAYS

Laura Secord lived for fifty-five years after this eventful journey. Her husband who never wholly recovered from his wounds became Collector of Customs, and survived this time of storm and battle for twenty-eight years.

Of Mrs. Secord's family four daughters married, and two were unmarried. One son Charles, a well known barrister, lived till 1872, and one of Charles Secord's daughters, Mrs. Isaac Cockburn has been a resident of Winnipeg for a number of years.

She remembers her grand mother and says: "She was of fair complexion, with kind brown eyes, a sweet and loving smile hovering about the mouth. This did not denote weakness. She was five feet four inches tall, and slight in form."

Mrs. Cockburn further says: "My grand mother was a woman of strong personality and character, and her word carried great weight with it. She was a great favorite with young people, who on returning from school for their holidays, would say after a brief time in the house, "Now we must go and see Mrs. Secord."

When the Prince of Wales, our present King, visited Canada in 1860, the veterans presented him with an address signing their names to it. Laura Secord insisted on signing hers also, as being one of them. The Prince of Wales hearing of her great service to the Empire, asked more fully of her, of this she was very proud, and all the more when she afterwards received from him, on his return to England the sum of £100 sterling.

Full of years (93) and honors, Mrs. Secord passed away, and was laid beside her husband in the burying ground of Lundy's Lane, or Drummondville, or still again Niagara Falls South, as it is called. This burying ground was surely suitable for the last resting place of one who had gone through so many of the storms of life, for it was the old battlefield of Lundy's Lane, the most san-

guinary and so far as Canada was concerned the most successful battle of the war, (July 26, 1814), though it cost so many precious lives.

In 1901 the Ontario Historical Society erected a handsome monument over the grave of Laura Secord. Appropriate ceremonies were conducted. I had the pleasure of being present as a guest on that occasion, in the burying ground perhaps the most historic in all Canada. We shall hold the names of our historic dead in grateful remembrance. When can their glory fade! Brave men, and brave and faithful women were they.

“Ah! faithful to death were our women of yore!
Have they fled with the past to be heard of no more?
No. No! Though this laurelled one sleeps in the grave,
We have maidens as true, we have matrons as brave;
And should Canada ever be forced to the test—
To spend for our country the blood of the best—
When her sons lift the linstock and brandish the sword,
Her daughters will think of brave Laura Secord.”

—Charles Mair.

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