CONTENTS

Editor’s Note – 4

Essays

“The Vice of a Cold Climate:” Drink and Soldiering on Niagara’s Wartime Frontier (1812-14).
RENÉE N. LAFFERTY – 5

Smoke and Mirrors: Gender, Colonialism, and the Royal Commission on Opium, 1893-95.
JOYCE A. MADANCY – 37

THORA HANDS – 62

Dispensing the Progressive State: Benjamin Tillman’s South Carolina State Dispensary.
JAMES HILL WELBORN III – 82

Book Reviews

Reviewed by Noelle Plack – 102
Dodgson, Rick. *It’s All a Kind of Magic: The Young Ken Kesey.* Reviewed by W. J. Rorabaugh – 103


Gina Hames. *Alcohol in World History.* Reviewed by David T. Courtwright – 108

Jonathan Herring, Ciaran Regan, Darin Weinberg, Phil Withington, eds. *Intoxication and Society: Problematic Pleasures of Drugs and Alcohol.* Reviewed by William Haydock – 109
“THE VICE OF A COLD CLIMATE:”
DRINK AND SOLDIERING ON NIAGARA’S WARTIME FRONTIER (1812-14)¹

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Abstract. Drawing attention to the importance of alcohol during the War of 1812, this article examines its uses in military culture, beginning with the assumption that liquor was not a uniformly destructive or disruptive force. From the realms of discipline, ritual and recruitment, to the experience of the battlefields, the barracks and the medical tents, liquor was simultaneously necessary for demonstrating manliness and threatening to the man himself. It was both essential to the successful execution of the war, and damaging to the efforts of both Britain and the United States. The war was fought on the doorstep of the nineteenth century temperance movement, but it remained reflective of pre-temperance attitudes towards drink and the drinker; the resulting tension between intoxication and drunkenness, the delicate balance between the manly drinker and the drunkard, is thus clearly revealed.

On the evening of 22 August 1813, in the midst of war with England and at the height of sailing season on Lake Ontario, acting Lieutenant Francis Hoyt Gregory of the United States Navy, then only twenty-three years old, made the abrupt decision to resign from the service (See Figure 1). He did not do so out of despair, exhaustion, illness, or disagreement with his nation’s war aims; he did not do so because he was at odds with his commodore, his comrades, or because he had tired of naval life. Instead, Gregory made the decision to quit that evening, sitting to dinner in the officer’s mess, after he had been “warmed with wine” and had endured the “sneering remarks” of his companions about the fact that he had been overlooked for a long-awaited commission. The following morning, a sobered Gregory was horrified to discover that he had not only boasted about resigning on account of this perceived injustice, but had actually composed a letter to that effect at the supper table, then sent the letter to the Secretary of the Navy in Washington. Worse still, Gregory had kept no copy of the ill-fated missive and had been too drunk to recall its contents. He was, as he confessed to his commodore, the renowned Isaac Chauncey, “extremely unhappy least he may have been indecorous in his style.”²

In a scene likely worthy of a C.S. Forester novel, a chagrined, quite

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probably hung-over Gregory requested (perhaps begged) that his Commodore intercede on his behalf and convince the Secretary of the Navy to “forget that he ever wrote such a letter.” Chauncey agreed, and explained to his superior that the hapless Gregory was “an officer of more than common merits [who] possesse[d] all the requisites to make a most valuable officer.” Despite his indiscretion with a pen, Gregory was honourable, intelligent and courageous, and had performed his duties to the “perfect satisfaction” of the service. William Jones seemed convinced, and in October of that year, returned the offending correspondence to its author.³

Spectacles of inebriation like that unwittingly provided by Francis Gregory supply both amusing and distressing anecdotes in the history of the War of 1812. They also alert the modern reader to the possibility of serious alcohol abuse among the men. Excessive drinking was not a new concern during the early nineteenth century in any respect, however, nor was it unique to this particular conflict. Historians have detailed a long history of medical, governmental, and religious hand-wringing in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain over the effects of heavy drinking, particularly the consumption of distilled spirits.⁴ Curiously, however, this literature has had little impact on discussions of soldierly consumption during the War of 1812. Rarely is the subject indexed in popular or academic studies of the war, and when mentioned, stories of drinking and drunkenness are anecdotal, meant to amuse or provide narrative colour to what most historians of this conflict privilege as truly meaningful: tactics, technologies, and treaties, the manoeuvres of armies, the relative skills of commanding officers, and the intrigues of diplomats and politicians.⁵ The history of 1812 is overwhelmingly dominated by military history,⁶ and in such an environment, the cultural power of alcohol and the cultural experience of the war itself (which alcohol is crucial to defining) are buried beneath a veritable mountain of scrupulous and inflexible detail.

As this paper seeks to demonstrate, calling attention to the significance of alcohol in this war cannot be accomplished merely by repeating stories of drunken routs, pointing out the excesses, or speculating on the degree to which alcoholism negatively affected the fighting man. Such an approach, easily distorted by a somewhat myopic scholarly fascination with temperance and addiction,⁷ wrongly presumes that alcohol was a uniformly destructive and disruptive force. It erases the admittedly delicate line between drinking as a pleasurable social act, and alcohol as a troubling social problem – between intoxication and drunkenness.⁸ Liquor was certainly identified as the cause of poor discipline, ill health, cowardliness and disreputable behaviour, but it was also marked as a source of inspiration, of good health, bravery, and manly strength. It was a crucial ingredient of regular military rituals and the cultural environment of militarism itself: It was a tool which a man could use to demonstrate his manhood, as well as a tool
which could strip him of the same; drunkenness was the behaviour of the effeminate and weak, but the man who could hold his liquor was admired, and even lionized. As Samuel Johnson had explained several decades prior to the war, strong drink and the ability to handle it was not only the mark of manliness, but heroism: “claret is the liquor for boys,” he quipped, “port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero (smiling) must drink brandy.”

The message of this aphorism was articulated throughout the military community during the War of 1812, as frequently and as strongly as condemnations of excessive inebriation.

The distance between intoxication and drunkenness is a short one, and in the early nineteenth century that distance was shrinking. While rarely acknowledged in histories of the temperance movement, the War of 1812 sat at the very doorstep of this disappearing middle-ground – on the cusp of the flowering of temperance activity, when even moderation was a vice. While it was on this particularly significant cusp, however, neither English
nor North American society had yet crossed the threshold, and the men in the barracks and battlefields of Niagara (who are the particular focus of this story) were as much products of the eighteenth as the nineteenth century. They lived between an age when alcohol was what American preacher Increase Mather called a “Good Gift of God” (1673), what English theologian John Wesley declared “all good if received with Thanksgiving” (1742), and an age wherein all alcohol was a “demon” and drinking an “evil” which ruined good society, health, and morality. In such a liminal environment, the pleasure of drink is as important a consideration as its dangers. The delicate balance between intoxication and drunkenness made the control of alcohol especially difficult as well, particularly in a military environment where it was constitutive of the very stuff of manhood. This duality, central to alcohol’s meaning and active influence, can be found by examining (as this paper does), the tensions it brought to the execution of the war. Several elements of war-time experience are examined to this end, including discipline, recruitment, day-to-day conduct in the barracks and camps, battlefield experience, and medical treatment of the sick and wounded.

Before examining the social and cultural worlds of drunkenness and intoxication in 1812, however, a few words are required about the rather unusual approach taken here, whereby national differences are more-or-less ignored. Drawing mainly on evidence related to the Great Lakes and Niagara frontiers, British, Canadian, and American experiences are blended together throughout this paper. While allegiances are identified, they are not meant to indicate stark differences in opinion or experience. This is not to say that there were no differences between the attitudes and cultures of the various peoples engaged in this war: as I discovered, for example, the tone of medical treatises seems to indicate a much stronger reliance on evangelically-inspired arguments about drink among American doctors, than British. However, what I was struck by during my research were the profound similarities of experience that crossed those boundaries of national allegiance which are usually vital markers of identity. It was, after all, a war – the English and Americans were enemies – and this presupposes that their differences outweighed their common interests. However, as English Lieutenant John LeCouteur observed, the War of 1812 was a conflict “uncomfortably like a civil war,” and in many respects, the combatants retained powerful cultural affinities. Indeed, the citizens mustered for the Canadian militia and placed in charge of the colony’s government were, many of them, descendants of American Loyalists – people who Major General Sir Isaac Brock declared were “so completely American as to rejoice in the prospect of a change of government.”

These cultural affinities are starkly apparent in the drinking habits of the men – and not only in those aspects which are outlined below, regarding
discipline, recruitment, barrack life, etc. Throughout the war, and contrary
to our modern expectation of the trouble with fraternization, there are nu-
merous examples of enemy combatants sharing drinks together, suggesting
that alcohol was a medium by which the enmity of war was forgotten,
and the ties of cross-national friendship and culture reestablished. While a
prisoner of war in the United States, for example, British Lieutenant Da-
vid Wingfield of the Royal Navy recalled, on several occasions, sharing
food and wine with his “captors,” – and enjoying himself in the process.
As he wrote about his time in Concord, Massachusetts, “between public
balls, and private parties, we passed our time, exceedingly pleasant.” And
when he and his fellow officers were finally paroled and given permis-
sion to return to Canada, they threw a ball for the inhabitants of Cheshire,
Massachusetts, where they had been held for several weeks. After the
war, celebrations of peace frequently featured alcohol shared between for-
erm enemies, as well. As LeCouteur reported in February of 1815, “Sev-
eral American officers came over from Sackets Harbor with the news [of
peace]. We received them very well, gave them dinner, and made our Band
play ‘Yankee Doodle’ on drinking the President’s health which gave them
great pleasure.” In March of 1815, Sir James Yeo, the commander of the
British fleet on Lake Ontario, took advantage of the peace to meet his war-
time nemesis, Isaac Chauncey. Chauncey’s hospitality was reportedly so
gracious that Yeo prolonged his stay until 2 April. Nationality did reflect
cultural and political differences between these men, but sometimes, the
focus on nationality masks important similarities and affinities. In an at-
tempt to understand the cultural meaning of alcohol in military commu-
nities, I found a focus on these affinities far more useful and illuminating.

Taken at face value, the many stories of drunkenness during the War of
1812 seem to confirm the near-unanimous opinion of historians that alco-
holism pervaded military communities at near-epidemic levels in the late
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Against the foil of a modern-
day abstemious military, such an assessment is surely accurate; and when it
is recalled that alcohol – anywhere between a half-gill to a gill of whiskey
or rum – was part of a man’s daily ration (not to mention wine, beer or
port, when it could be obtained), excessive drinking seems an inevitabil-
ity. This ration was by no means unique to the War of 1812. For centuries,
it was standard fare for soldiers, and at the outbreak of war in 1812, men
mustered for the militia and enlisted in the standing armies and navies of
both Great Britain and the United States entered a social world wherein
alcohol was both normal and necessary. It was what General James Wolfe
called “the cheapest pay for work that can be given.” Alcohol’s normal-
ity within military culture echoed its ubiquity in the civilian realm (the
idea of a “dry” military was probably unthinkable until the mid-19th century temperance movement made it plausible for civilians). As countless studies have demonstrated, alcohol is embedded into the deepest roots of many cultures. Events both public and private, celebratory and mournful, ritualistic and spontaneous, have alcohol woven into their experience. As John O’Brien writes, alcohol is “society’s grand elixir, the medium through which communion with the god is achieved, grief alleviated, friendship developed, strength renewed, work rewarded, dead men honoured, confidence acquired, hospitality provided, and sleep guaranteed.” It is the substance “capable of providing a warm sense of fellowship and escape from the uncertainty and powerlessness of the human condition.” That it should have been part of the experience of soldiering is thus not surprising. Indeed, it existed on the boundary that connected civilian and military cultures, as a prominent feature of regular, peace-time militia musters where newly elected officers were expected to “treat” the men. As one recently selected militia colonel declared, “I can’t make a speech, but what I lack in brains I will try to make up in rum.”

During the eighteenth century, however, drinking acquired a new – and problematic – aspect, with the spread of distillation technologies. Distillation not only produced particularly potent spirits, but provided them at relatively low costs to consumers. Over the course of that century, not surprisingly, governmental, medical and religious concerns about extreme and chronic inebriation multiplied as rates of consumption soared. In England during the so-called gin craze of the early eighteenth century, the amount of liquor consumed rose by seven fold, from approximately half a gallon per person, per annum, to 2.2 gallons (ten litres). Higher prices and stricter licensing laws after mid-century decreased consumption somewhat, but at century’s end, Englishmen drank almost as much as their American counterparts, who were among the thirstiest consumers in the world. As W. J. Rorabaugh has detailed, among American civilians the annual per-capita consumption of spirits alone (mainly whiskey) exceeded nineteen litres in the first three decades of the century – a rate that does not account for alcohol which was not taxed or counted as part of a distiller’s records. While not all men imbibed so heavily, by the late 1820s the average adult male drank nearly half a pint (eight ounces) per day.

High consumption was enabled in part by the abundance of surplus grain crops in the United States, and the consequently low costs of distilled liquor. It may also have been reflective, as Rorabaugh suggests, of a culture in which drinking was symbolic of the political freedom achieved during the Revolution. Indeed, despite vocal disciplinary and medicinal concerns expressed about the army ration during that war, consumption increased with the achievement of independence, and no substantive effort was made to eliminate the practice. As Benjamin Rush – whose wartime experience
as the Surgeon General of the Army inspired some of his most articulate writing against the drinking of spirits – lamented in 1777, “It requires an arm more powerful than mine – the arm of a Hercules – to encounter [arguments supporting] the custom of drinking spiritous liquors… in our army.”

Consumption rates among civilians in Upper Canada are more difficult to estimate, although in 1920, historian W. H. Riddell described the early nineteenth colony as “perhaps the most drunken country in the world,” where a “raw, fiery, and potent [whiskey] was the universal beverage.” Some idea of drinking rates are available for this period: in the 1830s, a single district (Bathurst) boasted six distilleries which provided around sixty gallons of spirits per day which, if consumed in that district alone, would mean a per-capita consumption of just over thirteen litres per person over the age of fifteen. While lower than the rates in the United States, these numbers do not include the consumption of home-brewed beers or ciders, which may have provided the mainstay for civilian drinking.

There are a number of things which contribute to the perception that military alcoholism was especially problematic, as set apart from such civilian tippling. The difficulty drunkenness posed for officers attempting to maintain discipline among the ranks is an obvious one. Discipline was, as American Colonel George McFeely explained to the men at Fort Niagara in 1813, “the Military Polar Star, the palladium of their Salvation.” When men failed to demonstrate respect for the rules or for rank, they not only broke with regulation, but committed a “Serious evil,” which was “calculated to make an army but another [term] for a Mob.” A General Order issued to the British troops by Sir George Prevost in 1814 echoed this opinion; the entire service would “languish” without “the existance [sic] of the very Soul of Military Discipline.”

Discipline was, in effect, that carefully manufactured environment which ensured victory over the enemy; any thing which threatened discipline – including alcohol – could threaten the entire cause of the war.

Discipline was a complicated thing, however, both in relation to military regulations and in relation to the threat which alcohol posed to its maintenance. It was defined, in some respects, by external behaviour alone: orderly parades, peaceful barracks, clean uniforms, well-ordered weaponry, and demonstrated respect for the commands of superior officers. But achieving these outwards signs of discipline was not as simple as giving orders or enforcing rules. The manner in which both McFeely and Prevost employed celestial, sacred language – using words like salvation, evil and soul in their definitions of good behaviour – hints at the way discipline was conceived as something far more than behavioural; it involved the deepest, inner motivations of the individual soldier and it defined his character. Discipline, as a distinct and pervasive characteristic of the military experi-
ence, required that soldiers inculcate specific values and understandings of self and manhood— and, further, it tied that sense of self to the demands of the state. The effective creation of this culture of discipline could not be achieved by merely bellowing orders at the ranks, or punishing wrongdoers: it was dependent upon (and expressive of) the creation of a particular cultural environment, in which a soldier was inspired to be, as U.S. Army Surgeon James Mann explained, “ambitious to execute his duty with fidelity” and in which he was treated in a manner that would inspire “exalted sentiments of honor and justice, so necessary to secure his warmest attachment, and faithful service to the state.”

Many military historians explain this degree of duty and fidelity within military cultures as being the result of “primary group cohesion,” or esprit de corps, an ingredient crucial for inspiring men to fight and to kill other men. Housed and trained together, suffering the same hardships and privations, experiencing the same physical threat from the enemy, are said to inspire a close camaraderie and loyalty which, as Rory Muir argues for the French regiments during the Napoleonic Wars, was “the strongest bond which held a unit together in action.” More important than “drink or patriotism,” he writes, this group loyalty was inspired by the soldiers’ “commitment… to each other, and their pride. Cut off from their families and civil society, leading a life that was unusually harsh and often dangerous, soldiers depended on each other for encouragement, companionship, and even survival.”

While this definition takes for granted (and unfortunately congeals) a somewhat idealized, even romanticized and nostalgic image of the soldier, it does provide a useful sense of how military cultures could, and did, differ from their peace-time counterparts. Unlike Muir, however, I would argue that drink (perhaps even patriotism, though exploring that concept with any degree of diligence is outside the scope of this paper) was not independent of esprit de corps, not a parallel force of cohesion, but an element essential in creating and reinforcing it. It was also something which could, and did, threaten it.

Many descriptions of war-time and peace-time military forces, contemporaneous and historical, link some part of the problem of inebriation among the troops to the methods used for raising them. As Alan Taylor argues, military authorities in the United States “reaped what [they] sowed” by “haunt[ing] taverns to ply men with free drinks, weakening their resistance” and turning them out in uniforms. James Mann noted the consequences of these practices (and subtly reinforces evidence for the rise in consumption of hard liquor in the early nineteenth century) when he lamented that many recruits were “incapable of enduring the fatigues and hardships incident to war.” Their inability stemmed, he believed, from their civilian experience, where they had been “habitually intemperate, with
constitutions broken down by inebriation and its consequent diseases.” He pointed the finger of blame directly at recruiters, who were too concerned “to fill up their rolls with numbers; without reflecting, that the strength of an army consists in able-bodied men.” In England, recruiting parties also frequented taverns to seek out likely candidates, even employing musicians “to drum up a crowd” before plying them with alcohol. The “alarming magnitude” of drunkenness in the British Navy has been attributed to the fact that recruiters “literally scraped the barrel” in search of recruits, and the Duke of Wellington’s dictum, that members of the English Army had “all enlisted for drink” (or “from having got bastard children”) has become a veritable truism among historians examining the lives of soldiers and sailors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

If alcohol is understood, first and foremost, as a social and cultural problem, these assessments of recruitment practices and their consequences are accurate enough. However, the tavern was not only a place which weakened resolve, but also one which could, potentially, tighten the bonds of brotherhood and friendship. Drinking was not only a physical act which introduced an intoxicant into the body and rendered it vulnerable to suggestion; it was a cultural act which, performed in a convivial atmosphere mirroring the atmosphere of a military encampment (i.e., being peopled almost exclusively by men), might actually have been useful to recruiters seeking out like-minded candidates whose temperaments echoed those of enlisted men and veterans. To be sure, recruiters downplayed the discomforts and risks of soldiering and exaggerated the potential glories, adventures, and riches to be gained. They also enlisted countless inebriates and rogues in a desire to increase their commission. For much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, popular opinion of the army and navy suffered as a result. Military service was often seen as the last resort of the feckless, drunken, and hopelessly licentious, and “a Red Coat [was] but little Recommendation anywhere.” However, a military life could provide stable employment, clothing and food (however inadequate they may have been) and, though rarely, the opportunity for social mobility. Many men thus recruited experienced stable, fruitful careers; many of them, indeed, were not rogues and thieves or men attempting to escape paternal responsibility, but “men of respectable origins,” who sought experiences denied them in civilian life. Despite frequent condemnation of military service, moreover, it appealed to a notion of manliness which carried enormous cultural weight. Once more, Samuel Johnson captures this plainly, hinting at the benefits which the adventure a Red Coat promised: “Every man thinks meanly of himself,” he explained,

for not having been a soldier, or not having been at sea… were Socrates and Charles the Twelfth of Sweden both present in any company, and Socrates to say, “Follow me, and hear a lecture in philosophy;” and Charles, laying his
hand on his sword, to say, “Follow me, and dethrone the czar;” a man would be ashamed to follow Socrates… the profession of soldiers and sailors has the dignity of danger.”

Once enlisted, soldiers and sailors found alcohol present at a number of social functions and gatherings which, like the ritual of enlistment itself, both fostered a sense of esprit de corps and defined the boundaries of manly behaviour. While some lamented the ritual presence of alcohol (such as the doling out of the daily ration) for its deleterious effects on health and order, and while some historians have described the “monotony of barrack life” as something which “naturally drove many to drink as a form of recreation,” these assessments, again, presume that alcohol was uniformly problematic, and served only to provide temporary respite from the grind of reality (which it did, on occasion). While not discounting incidents where ritual and leisure-time drinking led to tragedy, there were clear benefits derived from recreational drinking. Descriptions of holidays, such as Christmas or New Year, frequently noted the pleasures which men took in “Reveling and Drinking” from evening until “Rool was called.”

In several published reminiscences and war-time journals, the prominence and importance of a “jolly” mess is plainly evident; while clearly nostalgic, such memoirs indicate, nonetheless, what the ideal was supposed to be, and how alcohol promoted it. English surgeon William Dunlop, for example, likened his Mess to a family; indeed, he claimed that “No private family ever lived in more concord or unanimity than did ‘Our Mess,’” despite – or perhaps because of the fact – that they “rarely went to bed without a respectable quorum of them getting a leetle to the lee side of sobriety.”

The war-time journal of John LeCouteur is also replete with stories which feature both the pleasures and friendship – the esprit de corps – inspired by the bottle. In April of 1813, stationed in Kingston, for example, he noted that “While the heavy rains lasted… the lads would often come and sit with us, drink our Brandy and water and sing us to Sleep.”

Somewhat hypocritically, LeCouteur disapproved of regular drinking among sub-ordinates. In 1812, a few months before his arrival in Canada, he ordered that the regular rum-ration doled out to a group of soldiers under his command be mixed with six parts water, rather than the usual four. He did this, he claimed, for the sake of discipline, because too much grog had rendered several of the men “very drunk… and insolent in the last degree.” His description of the aftermath of this command, a “regular mutiny” in which the men “threatened to pitch me overboard,” might be used as evidence of alcohol dependence in the military. The loss or weakening of the liquor ration was an “excruciating punishment for the many soldiers who were alcoholics,” and they risked a serious – indeed, a life-threatening – charge of mutiny to express their displeasure.
A different interpretation of this event, however, suggests both the challenge for historians studying more than the tactical aspects of this war, as well as the ubiquitous and positive cultural meaning that soldiers of all ranks attributed to alcohol. Drinking among officers like Dunlop and LeCouteur appears convivial; among enlisted men like those under LeCouteur’s command, it appears threatening. However, most written accounts of this war were penned by officers, the very men tasked with maintaining discipline, whose positions (and, as LeCouteur suggests, whose lives) were threatened by unruly behaviour. Their authority, and its occasional fragility, would certainly affect the re-telling of events. It is very probable, moreover, that the men under LeCouteur’s command did not threaten to toss him into the sea because of a craving for alcohol, but because he had disrupted a central ritual of their experience – indeed, he was threatening something which many soldiers and sailors envisioned as a right.\(^{51}\) This interpretation is hinted at, subtly, in LeCouteur’s account; the men accused him of being a “brat of a boy who had never seen a shot fired,” yet had the temerity to “ill use” veterans. Many of them also “flung away their weak grog” in protest – not the behaviour of men suffering uncontrollable thirst for alcohol.

There are other instances which expose the enlisted man’s understanding of drinking and drunkenness in the service, and demonstrate how it could both inspire and fortify their comradeship, whilst simultaneously threatening the discipline demanded by officers. In March of 1813, for example, four members of the 1st Regiment of U.S. Artillery were brought before a Garrison Court Martial at Fort Niagara accused of “riotous and unsoldierlike conduct.” According to witnesses, the men had decided to band together and force the release of their comrade Farrand, who had been locked up the previous night on a charge of drunkenness. Outraged by the news that Farrand was “to be exposed as a public spectacle for his misconduct,” the four “swore by God” that they would release him, one of them promising to do so “at the risk of his life.”\(^{52}\) On one hand, their behaviour demonstrates a degree of sympathy with the Farrand’s drunken behaviour, a belief that it was not something (at least in this case) which warranted arrest or punishment. On the other, it is clear that these men had forged the “cooperative, holistic, supportive”\(^ {53}\) relationships which are associated with esprit de corps, and which were likely fostered by shared consumption of liquor with Farrand as much as shared experience in drilling and fighting. It is also suggested, in this case, that some of the officer corps charged with punishing the prisoners, agreed. While the Garrison Adjutant noted that, had the men been charged before a General Court Martial, they would have been found guilty of mutiny and suffered death by firing squad, he suspended their sentence (twenty-five “cobbs” each, hard labour for a month, and the stoppage of their whiskey rations for the duration) on the promise of their good conduct.\(^ {54}\)
As Joyce Appleby has noted, in the early nineteenth century, prior to the flowering of the temperance activism so characteristic of the middle and later decades, “[d]rinking was an act that signalled and substantiated the man.” Those who chose to abstain from liquor not only set themselves apart “in a transformative way,” but were considered weak and effeminate by other men. This was the experience of John Lampman, a Captain in the service of the York Volunteers during the war; significantly, however, as Lampman (a Lieutenant at the time of the incident) recalled after the war, he apparently managed to prove to his fellows that sobriety did not render him weak. “The men of the barracks at Fort York” wrote his grandson, retelling Lampman’s story, “were drawing their regular ration of rum in the tin service cups with which every man was supplied. Captain McDonald of the Glengarries charged Lieut. Lampman of the Flankers with being no soldier because he threw his rum over his shoulder instead of drinking it. Lampman denied the charge, the lie was passed, the men clinched and McDonald was thrown into the fire-place.” The fight intensified briefly before it was agreed that Lampman and McDonald would settle the dispute with a duel the next morning. When Lampman appeared to defend his honour, however, he found his opponent missing. McDonald’s friends had apparently “induced him to drink enough to incapacitate him for his mad project of a duel, and had him helplessly drunk when sunrise came.”

Lampman’s attitude to the rum ration was likely quite unusual. Among most soldiers, in fact, there existed a subtle yet persistent opinion, dating from the early eighteenth century, that abstainers did not make good warriors. In part this was because abstention was usually framed as a moral, religious choice (though medical arguments did exist), and such morality was an uncomfortable bedfellow for the military man. According to Robert Dundas, Second Viscount Melville, in fact, “the worst men were the fittest for soldiers.” Samuel Ancell, an officer with the Fifty-Eighth Regiment serving during the siege of Gibraltar explained (through the voice of a soldier called “Jack Careless”), that it was “Fine talking of God with a soldier, whose trade and occupation is cutting throats; Divinity and slaughter sound very well together, they jingle like a crack’d bell in the hands of a noisy crier.” Reflecting on his experiences during the War of 1812, William Dunlop drew a deeply disparaging comparison between the men of his past and those of his present (the 1840s), by setting attitudes toward alcohol front and centre. His critique shows, if nothing else, how pervasive the concern for temperance had become, and how contrary it was to previous experience. “The Army is very different from what it was in my day,” he wrote,

sadly changed indeed! It will hardly be believed, but I have dined with officers who, after drinking a few glasses of wine, called for their coffee. If Waterloo was to fight over again, no rational man can suppose that we would
gain it after such symptoms of degeneracy. Such lady-like gentlemen would certainly take out vinaigrettes and scream at a charge of the Old Guard, and be horrified at the sight of a set of grim-looking Frenchmen, all grin and gash, whisker and moustache.59

Counsels for sobriety in military circles, not rare but certainly not as common as they would become after the war, recognized the difficulties which the teetotalling soldier might face. Josiah Woodward, perhaps the most well-known of these counsels through his oft-reprinted and widely circulated Soldier’s Monitor, urged enlisted men and officers alike to avoid excessive drinking, gambling, and licentiousness, and to cultivate modesty through regular prayer and avoidance of all “that Smut which renders any one’s Mouth more Odious and Nasty than a Dunghill.” But Woodward clearly recognized that such behaviour would set a man apart from his comrades. “[A]nd if Men laugh at you or mock you,” he advised, “you will find it to be the truest Glory to suffer Shame for his [i.e, Christ’s] sake.”60

Just as abstinence was ridiculed, so too was excessive or sloppy drunkenness; neither were considered fitting for a soldier and to accuse a man of being a drunkard was a clear insult to his character. In April of 1813, for example, a quarrel ensued between two Sergeants at Fort Niagara, Rogers and Holister, who shared the same barracks. After Holister accused Rogers of being drunk and demanding that he leave the room, Rogers accused him of being “a d----d rascal and a d----d liar,” and insisted that he “would go to the doctor and appeal to him whether he was drunk or not.” When the doctor, who was at supper with the other officers, told Rogers he would have to wait, Holister repeated his accusation, and Rogers then “caught hold of [him] and jirked him to the floor.” After kicking another man who attempted to calm him, Rogers was arrested, tried, and found guilty of “disorderly conduct” – but, importantly, not drunkenness.61 Several months earlier (also at Fort Niagara), in defending Colonel Haefer against the accusation that he had struck another man’s wife and called her an “Old Heifer,” several witnesses made a point of indicating that he was not, as the woman had accused him of being, drunk. In fact, witnesses stated that Heafer had acted in an exemplary, manly manner. Levy Penington, for example, “being duly sworn, Saith, that Corp’l Heafer was not drunk [and] came into the room, when Mrs Sowders told him they wanted no drunkards there[.] [S]ome words passed between them [and] when Mrs Sowders took up a pan handle to Strike Heafer, he said he would not strike a woman.”62

Accusations of drunkenness that were based in firmer evidence than that brought against Rogers and Haefer reveal that the behaviour was considered particularly deserving of punishment when it resulted in unmanly, unsoldierly conduct (such as, for example, using foul language, resorting to violence in settling personal disputes, or demonstrating disrespect for a superior officer).63 Regular tippling, even intoxication, was not generally
punished (officers and enlisted men alike would have found themselves under constant charge of a court martial if they were), provided the men in question kept their intoxicated selves under control or, as Acting-Lieutenant Gregory learned, if they were men of rank and influence. However, when drunkenness revealed, to the eyes of superior officers, a want of military bearing or discipline (particularly when such a want was openly displayed), condemnation was harsh. In May of 1814, for example, Sir George Prevost learned of a “most disgraceful affray” in the Quebec Barracks. Two privates, Dealon and Cambray, engaged in a “riot,” but each accused the other of instigating the fight. “[I]mprobable as this statement appears,” Prevost wrote, “it is the less worthy of credit on the part of Cambray, because it is proved, that he was much in Liquor and the Man with whom he fought, is a Wounded Invalid, deprived of the use of one of his Arms.” When Cambray enlisted the help of members of his battalion to defend himself from the men who came to Dealon’s aid, the brawl spread. It was, as Prevost described it, “a most disgraceful breach of Discipline, in Acts of outrage, derogatory to the Character of a Soldier.” However, Cambray’s intoxication was employed as the only possible explanation for the mêlée, because the men involved were soldiers, a group set apart by virtue of their military status. “Intoxication which is generally the Cause of the Soldier’s offence, pleads little in the extenuation of his Crime,” Prevost explained. However, “in this instance… His Excellency is willing to believe that there is no Militia man so base, who would deliberately and in his Sober Senses insult or ill treat a Soldier disabled by Wounds.”

Punishments meted out to drunken soldiers were various. Most of them saw a temporary stoppage of their liquor rations, others saw hard labour, extra duties or demotion, and others still were subjected to brief periods of confinement (though usually only at night, so that the prisoner could continue to perform his duties). In some cases however – those in which drunkeness threatened the security of the troops or, as in the case of Dealon and Cambray, demonstrated an utter lack of decorum and discipline – punishments could be much more severe. In the latter case, the officers involved in the affray were “publicly and severely reprimand[ed]” before the entire battalion, a shaming ritual that exposed them to ridicule and loss of respect, as it was designed to wound and humble their pride. As Richard Holmes notes, public ridicule also implicated the entire company as participants in the punishment, which then served to reinforce the rules of discipline. Only after these men had been so exposed were they released from prison.

Similar shaming practices were in use among the Americans. A soldier found drunk on guard duty was deprived of his whiskey for two weeks, for example, but was also subjected to a public (and likely painful) shaming, forced “to march from right to left in front of the Brigade, having his arms extended and lashed to a five-foot pole, with a bottle in each hand, one
of which is to be empty and the other filled. In 1813, Isaac Chauncey requested that Sailing Master Hutton, “an old offender… so habitually a drunkard that he is a disgrace,” be cashiered. This ritual expulsion of a disgraced officer would be conducted before the entire regiment or contingent of men on hand, and usually involved tearing any insignia from the offender’s uniform, breaking his sword, and knocking his hat off – removing all visible evidence of his association with his manly profession, clear signals of profound disgrace. It was considered such an extreme punishment, in fact, that Chauncey required the approval of the American President before he could carry it out.

Others found their punishments for drunken misbehaviour more physically painful than shameful. William Brown, a soldier posted at Charleston in 1813, was sentenced to one month’s hard labour, confinement at night for the duration, and ten minutes on a “pickett” for drunkenness and mutinous behaviour. In Niagara, private Michael Herrin, found drunk at his post, was also sentenced to ten minutes on a pickett, though the Commander at the fort, General Loomis, “disapproved” the sentence and had Herrin released. English drunkards faced corporal punishment as well. In February of 1812, before sailing for Canada, LeCouteur sat on a court martial jury for a man charged with “being drunk when on waiting for Guard.” Despite being a “manly fellow” who had “justified his plea,” he was still sentenced to one hundred lashes, an excruciating punishment which likely left his back a bloody mess, and may well have threatened his life. A year later, in Fredericton, LeCouteur arrested a forward Sentry found “in liquor[,] … a most heinous offence,” as it left the British post vulnerable to attack (“if a moose could have travelled in such intolerable cold”). While LeCouteur later believed the man had not been drunk but suffering from the effects of the deep freeze, the sentence passed down by the Regimental court martial may have been as many as three-hundred lashes. As LeCouteur explained, this was something of a happy ending; had the offender been tried in a Garrison court martial, the punishment could have reached 999 lashes.

Punishments for drunkenness, whether physical in nature or tending toward shame or deprivation, are not just evidence of the excesses to which alcohol could drive the imbiber. Nor do they merely reflect the attitudes of frustrated commanding officers attempting to reign in alcoholic subordinates by making examples of the unlucky few. The penalties also suggest a level of disgust with excessive inebriation, widely viewed as a condition entered into by choice rather than by physical compulsion or addiction. There was little sympathy for the chronic drinker, and in those cases where shame was employed in sentencing, a desire to ridicule the man who lacked the strength or the manliness to hold his liquor is clearly evident. Shame “attached to particular bodies through public displays” such as those employed by courts martial during the War of 1812, and while these
punishments may seem to lack the degree of cruelty visible in the pickett, the cobb, or the lash (which were, for added measure, usually performed before the entire Regiment or Garrison), there is a close proximity between shame and pain. The punishments were meant to be witnessed, the prisoner to be humiliated and debased. To be accused of drunkenness was to be accused of weakness, of an inability to control oneself; and for a soldier in the midst of war, strength and self-control (particularly that which promoted respect for order and discipline), were among the highest virtues a man could claim.

Paradoxically, as these incidents of punishment attest, alcohol was not only a source of disorderliness, but a means of enforcing discipline; in most of the cited cases liquor was withdrawn from the guilty party’s ration for anywhere from a few days to a few months. While this suggests the pragmatic desire of court martial juries to remove the perceived cause of bad behaviour, these stoppages were also imposed upon most of those (whether under British or American command) found guilty of offences that did not involve alcohol. At Fort Niagara, the use of vulgar language while on duty was frequently punished in this manner. In February of 1813, Private Joseph Jackson was charged with using vulgar language toward his Lieutenant. While drilling, the Lieutenant informed Jackson that his bayonet was “out of Order,” and would be of little use in actual combat. In response, Jackson “observed [that] he would poke the gun in their arse and blow them up.” He lost his whiskey rations for a month. That same month, John Anderson was similarly arraigned on charges of disorderly conduct for “swearing [sic] and using vulgar language when under arms.” After a brief scuffle with a Sergeant, Anderson reportedly ordered the man to “kiss my arse dam you.” He lost his whiskey for a week.

The removal of alcohol as a punishment for unsoldierly conduct underlines the awareness which commanding officers had of the pleasure their subordinates took from liquor. Not surprisingly, alcohol was also frequently doled out on special occasions, for celebrations, and to be used as a reward for good behaviour or demonstrated skill. At Lewiston during the first months of the war, for example, newly-minted soldiers and officers training under Lieutenant Colonel Solomon Van Rensselaer vied each morning in a target-shooting contest for the prize of a quart of whiskey. In July of 1814, on the other side of the border, George Prevost also speculated on the value of rum as a means to “facilitate the Service and tend to the comfort of the Soldier.” After being assured by a specially convened Board of Officers that such an extra ration was both “expedient and advisable,” the Governor-in-Chief informed the troops that he was “desirous to afford [them] every Comfort and indulgence within his power.” However, while this act of camaraderie doubtless inspired the sort of loyalty central to esprit de corps, it was also noted that the extra rum (measured at one
gill) was to be issued only to those soldiers and officers “Effective and Actually Serving in the Operation of the Campaign.” The “indulgence” was to be clearly understood as a “Favor,” and would continue only so long as supplies, and the good behaviour of the men, warranted. For those men travelling between posts, this doesn’t appear to have been very long. Only a few weeks after the extra ration was granted, Adjutant General Edward Baynes firmly cautioned officers about the “relaxing of Discipline and of Vigilance suffered to prevail among Troops while on a march.” Citing multiple problems with the methods of packing, embarking, and organizing the removal of troops, he also reminded them, pointedly, that the “Allowance of Spirits… [was] to be considered an indulgence… to be withheld in all instance of irregular conduct, from the individuals misbehaving.” When misconduct was widespread, the entire Corps or detachment was to be denied the ration until order was restored. As in rituals of shaming, the behaviour of a few – or even of a single man, if the conduct was considered serious enough – reflected on the entire company, and every man shared in the punishment.

As Prevost’s spirited indulgence suggests, alcohol was not only used as the proverbial carrot for good behaviour. Nor was it merely part of a man’s pay. Alcohol was considered a necessary part of soldiering, a balm for men suffering the extraordinary privations which the war imposed – and, during the war, the army’s need for alcohol could even trump concerns about food shortages. When the government in Upper Canada attempted to limit the use of the season’s meagre grain harvests for distillation, General Francis de Rottenburg, commander of the forces, protested. The Act had the potential to halt the production of alcohol altogether, and might thus deprive the army of its accustomed ration – a ration which he clearly believed to be a necessity, rather than a simple convenience or indulgence. Once the Act was in place, however, Rottenburg was informed that he had the power to override it. Because “not a gallon of whiskey or other spirits can be distilled,” it was “important to consider whether the army have other means of supply.” Not surprisingly, Rottenburg rescinded the Act by Proclamation shortly after it had been issued, and did not prohibit distillation until 1814, when a full supply of spirits had been acquired for the forces.

For some officers, it was not only the supply of alcohol which mattered or which signified the privations and trials of war, but its quality. When describing the meagre rations and widespread scarcity affecting the men stationed in Niagara in 1814, in fact, British Captain Armstrong found no better indication of hardship than to note that General Drummond had been forced, “on the anniversary of his Wedding day,” to celebrate with “whiskey made in the country which they drank out of one broken tea cup.”

The issuance of liquor during “fatigues” (manual labour) or before and after battle was also a common way of assisting men to deal with the condi-
tions of war. As American Benjamin Waterhouse reflected, when granted half a pint of rum, a sailing crew “gave three cheers, and went to work with the greatest cheerfulness and alacrity.” Commanding officers (and regular soldiers) also believed liquor would increase the fighting strength and bravery of their recruits, rendering them, essentially and literally, “fighting drunk.” Thus, the Newfoundland Regiment at Fort Erie in March of 1813, observing that “The Yankeys [sic] had their boats all ready to cross… received each half a pint of whiskey… and were fully determined to dispute every inch of ground at the point of the bayonet.”

Before the battle of Lundy’s Lane in 1814, British reinforcements were doled a “noggin of rum” while awaiting the order to move into the fray. During this battle, it was reported that “the Yankees was loth [sic] to quit their position, and being well fortified with whisky, [they stood] longer than ever they did before.” In this instance, however, too much whiskey may have been issued (or, just as likely, this British correspondent preferred to see intoxication rather than confusion, fear, or exhaustion in his enemy); “Some of them was so drunk,” he reported, “as to stagger into our lines, they suffered for their temerity.”

Liquor not only buoyed the spirits and inspired bravery on the battlefield but, as was common knowledge at the time, it supposedly protected the body from the rigors of an inhospitable climate, particularly uncertain water supplies, dampness, and cold weather. Complaining to his mother about the extra charge he was forced to pay for beer in Quebec, for example, Andrew Cochran, Prevost’s civil secretary during the war claimed that “it is absolutely necessary to drink [beer] here as the water is river water and has a very bad effect on strangers to the climate.”

In August of 1812, after jumping out of a bateau which had run aground on the north shore of Lake Erie, Isaac Brock apparently shared his own supply of liquor with the men who had jumped in with him. The spirits were meant to “prevent injury from their wet clothes.” In February of 1813, alcohol was also credited with preserving the health of British Lieutenant Jobling, who fell through the ice at Fredericton after attempting to skate home “in an overheated state from dancing” at a ball at Government House. Luckily, “hot brandy and water set him right.”

When caught out of doors in the dead of winter in 1814, William Dunlop, aware that his life – or at least his feet – were at risk of death, “poured a quantity of rum into [his] moccasins” to prevent them from freezing. When he was taken in by “some old French Canadians” who treated his frostbite by rubbing the affected areas with snow, he wrote, “of all the tortures which this world can devise, the resuscitation was the worst I experienced… it more than once produced fainting, which unpleasant symptom they combated by pouring down my throat a tin cup full of rum.”

Many others resorted to the use of alcohol to warm themselves or to pro-
vide protection from excessive heat or cold; less than salubrious living arrangements were the norm for thousands of British and American soldiers while on a march or in the field, as blankets, clothing, coats, and boots, to say nothing of food and alcohol were frequently in short (and occasionally direly short) supply. Frequently forced to sleep out of doors “with only a blanket” or a meagre sheet of canvas “suspended from the branch of a tree” to protect them from snow, wind, and rain, autumn and winter nights were described as quiet but for the “howlings of savage wolves” or the “coughing and groaning” of men suffering from exposure (fires were often forbidden, as they might attract the attention of enemy marauders). Warmer weather did not necessarily bring reprieve, either. American Samuel Albro hoped that “Legions of H--- fire [would] seize the Musquetoes!” that plagued his summer encampment, while his counterpart, James Commins, found Niagara “so extremely swampy that we was obliged to cut down trees to sleep upon to keep us from drowning [sic].” Some of those suffering under the open sky, however, interpreted the experience as giving proof of their own manly strength and heroism. “I sleep right on the Grown [sic] with my soldiers,” American Charles Livermore reported in 1812, “Cold or hot wet or Dry right in the roads or open fields like heros [sic] and patriots for the sake of our Country our fathers Mothers wives and Children and for Milions [sic] yet an born [sic].” In such conditions, whether cowards or heroes, the liquor ration was very likely a welcomed sight. Not all soldiers were quite so taken with their ration, however. In one remarkable incident in June of 1812, two soldiers at Fort Niagara were court-martialled for attempting to sell their whiskey rations (an illegal act because the rations were, technically, the property of the state). In their defence, the men explained that the members of their mess had “agreed to save their rations of whiskey and buy bread with it… or some other articles that would be better for us than the whiskey.” Perhaps ironically, they admitted that one of the first items on their shopping list was tobacco, “if they could get it.” This attempt to sell or barter a ration highlights – if nothing else – the meagre diet and living conditions under which the majority of soldiers lived. The response of these particular men, however, was unusual. As British Surgeon John Douglas wrote, “it is much to be lamented, that [the soldier] should so often resort to inebriation, as a temporary retreat from his numerous sufferings.” While inebriation may have lessened the hardships of army life, many men also believed that a host of other afflictions and diseases could be cured – or at least lessened in severity – by liquor. In November of 1813, for example, after a night of rich food (and, no doubt, too much alcohol) shared with the “marine big wigs” in their “snug little mess,” John LeCou- teur suffered a relapse of the “dysentery and subsequent boils” which had afflicted him for several weeks. He found, however, that “Port wine alone
restored the tone of my stomach.” John Douglas found this sort of folk remedy common among the civilian settlers in Upper Canada who had several “nostrums” for promoting health and healing which “are for the most part composed of bitter vegetable infusions and ardent spirits, to which are added Cayenne pepper, nutmeg, and other aromatic stimulants.” He was not impressed by their effectiveness. Neither was James Mann, who complained of the belief which “prevailed among the soldiers, that ardent spirits [were] a sovereign remedy for these complaints of the bowels [i.e. dysentery].

Concerns about folk remedies that employed wine, rum or whiskey were not indicative of a blanket restriction against the use of alcohol in medical treatment. As part of a doctor’s pharmacopeia, alcohol sat alongside a wide variety of substances employed to treat illness and injury, and it was by no means the most surprising thing in the medicine chest. Along with the variety of lancets for bloodletting and glass cups for blistering the skin, doctors dosed their patients with mercury and opium (two of the most commonly employed substances in the early nineteenth century), as well as lead, foxglove, sulphuric acid, arsenic, hemlock, tobacco, ammonia, and turpentine. Such drastic medicines were prized as treatments because they elicited visible (and often violent) reactions in patients; by the standards of the day, reaction was indicative of effective treatment.

Medical theory and practice in the early nineteenth century was gradually abandoning abstract theories about the functioning of the human body in favour of empirical evidence drawn from careful observation of symptoms, and careful consideration of the environments in which people lived and worked. Among the doctors serving during the War of 1812, carefully observed illnesses were frequently attributed to environmental causes, such as cold, damp, excessive heat, miasmas, and sudden shifts in temperature or seasonal irregularities (this belief is clearly reflected in the popular beliefs of the men who dosed themselves with alcohol to ward off injury, as noted above). Whatever the cause, treatments attempted to re-establish balance between the body and its environment by effecting dramatic change in a patient’s symptoms. Thus, bleeding and blistering were techniques used to calm the restless, to cool those suffering from fevers or reduce the symptoms of inflammation. Emetics and cathartics like saltpeter and calomel (mercury) were used precisely because of their violent effects (and how effectively they cleaned out) those suffering from a wide variety of illnesses. And alcohol was employed – often “with a liberal hand” – as a stimulant for the circulatory or nervous system, or as a vehicle for administering unpalatable medicines like Peruvian bark (quinine). Soldiers recovering from pneumonia, fevers, various abdominal complaints, or particularly intensive bleedings which left them weak or listless, were thus frequently issued brandy or wine to assist their recovery.
During the war, a number of treatments and techniques used on the wounded and the sick indicate that doctors believed alcohol to have other medicinal qualities, as well. James Mann, for example, reported the case of a soldier suffering from dysentery whose recovery was effected solely through the administration of two pints of wine per day, for two weeks – the alcohol was clearly both a stimulant and nutritive substance. Alcohol was also considered to be “antiseptic,” which in the early nineteenth century referred to its ability to prevent putrefaction. At the army hospital at York (Toronto), for example, John Douglas reported the rather ghastly use of injections of diluted spirits into wounds and into the stumps of amputees as a means of killing off maggots and insect eggs which, once hatched, “consumed parts which were necessary to form a new bond of union.”

Alcohol was also used as an anaesthetic for patients undergoing surgeries and amputations, including British soldier Shadrach Byfield, who was given mulled wine before surgeons removed his left arm. Indeed, alcohol of all sorts likely flowed freely in army hospitals during times of particular emergency – such as that which confronted American surgeon William Beaumont, following the explosion of the Grand Magazine at Fort York, in 1813. The blast killed dozens of men instantly, and seriously wounded several hundred more, many of whom suffered “comp[ound] fractures of legs, thighs & arms, and fractures of Sculls – we were all night engaged in amputating and dressing the worst of them – the next day also, & the day after.”

Importantly, while many of the physicians working among the sick and wounded during the war had learned and accepted these various and long-employed medicinal uses for alcohol, they were also clearly imbibing popular, religious, and medical concerns about the use of distilled spirits. This concern was in evidence throughout medical communities in both the United States and Great Britain, and physicians on both sides of the Atlantic (and consequently both sides of the war) made clear distinctions between good and healthful drinks (those which were fermented, like beer, cider and wine) and those which were bad and harmful (those which were distilled, like whiskey and gin). These distinctions both reflected and reinforced the popular understanding of the difference between manly drinking and un-manly drunkenness.

The consumption of “good” alcohol was considered to be beneficial, even necessary, for a man’s health. The consumption of “bad” alcohol – particularly if it was consumed habitually and in great quantities – was considered both an exciting and predisponent cause of a multitude of diseases and ailments, from pneumonia and rheumatism, to jaundice, dropsy, epilepsy, madness, palsy, apoplexy, and eventually death (see Figure 2). As James Mann contended, and doubtless many of his colleagues agreed, any disease “which might have been mild, generated only by unavoidable
Figure 2: “Moral and Physical Thermometer” developed by American physician Benjamin Rush, indicating the physical and moral effects of various kinds of alcoholic beverages.

causes, became severe, by alcoholic excitement.”

During the war, doctors were particularly concerned about the common, deeply entrenched belief that “ardent spirits” were effective protection from the cold. Mann took particular pains to counter this widespread axiom insisting upon what “may be esteemed medical heresy” – that alcohol was actually more harmful in cold weather, than in warm (though he certainly did not advocate fair-weather tippling, either). English physician John Douglas, far less strident than his American counterpart, also noted – rather clinically, by comparison – that intoxication could lead to “exanimation” in the “severity of winter’s cold,” as liquor compromised the “vital energy” of the men so afflicted. At least part of this message filtered out of the medical realm. Somewhat disingenuously considering the number of times he referred to the use of brandy as warming stimulant, LeCouteur claimed that the only men who had died following the epic march of his regiment from Fredericton to Kingston in the winter of 1813, were the “hardest drinkers.” He had “no doubt whatever,” he wrote, “that dram-drinking is highly injurious in a very cold country as the heat that is momentarily conveyed to the body is followed by a reaction which the cold turns quickly into a numbness and retarded circulation.” The influence of earlier physicians, including Benjamin Rush, on his thinking (as well as Mann’s and Douglas’s) is clear: “There cannot be a greater error,” Rush had explained, “than to suppose that spirituous liquors lessen the effects of cold upon the body. On the contrary… they always render the body more liable to be affected and injured… The temporary warmth they produce is always exceeded by chillness.”

For the most part, despite their concerns about over-consumption and chronic inebriation, American and British physicians of the war years continued to believe as their predecessors had, that moderation was not a vice. “Temperance” as it was to be found in the late 1820s and 1830s was not part of this wartime medical context; abstinence was not a requirement of responsible drinking or healthful living. Indeed, as British-Canadian doctor William Dunlop lamented in the 1840s, the lack of alcohol could positively un-man an army (see above). And distilled spirits, if carefully controlled and judiciously used, could be a necessary and beneficial part of medical treatment. James Mann had even speculated, in fact, that distilled liquors were originally developed for medicinal purposes alone. Had their use and control been “confined to the store-houses of druggists, and the dispensaries of physicians, the sphere of their utility would be vastly enlarged,” and their evil effects eliminated.

Whatever cultural significance alcohol may have carried, these evil effects were often flagrantly displayed in military society during the War of 1812. Chronic inebriation was in evidence on both sides of the border, and it was difficult for any officer or soldier (or indeed any historian) to ignore
it. Soldiers gambled away their pay, sold their clothing, shoes, even their weapons, to obtain money for the purchase of liquor. They were seen to rifle the pockets of the dead after a battle, searching for canteens and flasks, while others would defy orders and risk court martial to visit nearby taverns or sutlers. Prisoners of war, denied access to “their beloved stimulants… had rather lie down and rot, and die, than exert themselves.”

Over-indulgence also led to military disaster, as the Americans learned on 4 July 1813, when the British captured Fort Schlosser; “too drunk from celebrating independence,” the Americans had failed to “post any guards.” Perhaps the most spectacularly disturbing evidence of alcoholism, however, pertains to the American soldiers who apparently resorted to drinking the whiskey which had, to that point, been used to preserve the body of Brigadier General Zebulon Pike, killed in the magazine explosion at York, in April of 1813.

Commanding officers made some effort to curb drinking among the soldiery, generally by restricting access. A few short weeks after Brock’s death, Major General Shaeffe informed the populace of Niagara that “Merchants, Innkeepers and Sutlers, and all other persons” were forbidden “to sell spirituous liquors of any sort or description whatsoever, within one Mile distance of the respective [British] Military Posts… between Niagara and Fort Erie inclusive, unless by License.” Defaulters were threatened with fine and imprisonment. Similar efforts were made across the river at Fort Niagara where, in October of 1813, the Garrison was informed that “no spirits of any kind wither Rum, Brandy, wines, whiskey or Cider will be permitted to be sold, Bartered or in any way Bargained for within this Garrison… or within one hundred yards of the Barrier Gates.” It was also decreed that “No person [civilian or soldier] will be permitted to pass inside… with a pail, Bucket, camp kettle, tin pan or Canteen or any kind of cup that can contain spirits with out a written permission.” There is some evidence that the British Chaplaincy – a woefully undermanned yet determined branch of the service – was also aware of the dangers liquor posed to the service. In a letter to Theophile des Brisay, army chaplain in Charlottown, Prince Edward Island, Chaplain General John Owen urged his subordinate to do “all you can for the Spiritual benefit of the Soldiers.” He warned particularly about alcohol, noting that “Drunkenness is the vice of cold climates and I fear liquor is cheap with you.”

These attempts at controlling the flow of spirit, while firm in language and often fervently attempted, were easily circumvented – and, I believe, often enforced only half-heartedly. As Kopperman notes of the eighteenth century British Army, to restrict access too stringently would be to deny access to the officers themselves, who enjoyed their ration as much as the sol-
diers. Moreover, as this paper argues, despite its challenges, alcohol clearly played a positive role in military society during the war; it was far more than a problem or a basic tool for coping during periods of extraordinary stress and toil. It was a central feature of ritual, of military experience and esprit de corps; it not only threatened discipline, but enforced it; it was seen to inspire the man, as much as endanger him. It was, in many circumstances, a beneficial and creative force. This role should not be romanticised, however, or used to ignore the serious problems which excessive drinking often resulted in; sailors and soldiers (even those who remained out of trouble) could not have been ignorant of the disruptions caused by excessive liquor consumption. Alcohol’s place in the War of 1812 was, much like the context in which the war itself happened, liminal; opinions about the social, moral and political importance of temperance were comparatively marginal – but drinkers and teetotallers alike understood the power of the substance to negatively affect the consumer. When those consumers were soldiers tasked with defending their national interests on a battlefield, alcohol’s importance and its dangers were amplified. It is, as a result, as significant a part of the history of the War of 1812 as any consideration of tactical manoeuvres, victories, defeats, or ultimate outcomes.

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ENDNOTES
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3. Chauncey Fonds, Pt. 2, Chauncey to Jones, 6 October 1813.

4. The following were particularly influential to this paper: Brian Harrison, Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815-1872 (London: Faber and Faber,


7. As Ray Oldenburg observed, a persistent focus on the negative social aspects of drinking has created “a distortion.” When the positive aspects of drinking are “consistently slighted… that distortion ultimately amounts to condemnation. If investigators fail to recognize what normal, decent people ‘get’ out of barroom visitation, and how community depends on such gatherings, it is but a short step to describing them in pathetic and deviate terms.” Oldenburg, “Augmenting the Bar Studies,” *Social History of Alcohol Review* 28-29 (1994), 31.

8. Throughout this paper I use the word “intoxication” to refer to the convivial, pleasurable aspects and effects of drinking, as distinct from its closely-related opposite (referred to here as “drunkenness”). See also Roth, *Drunk the Night Before: An Anatomy of Intoxication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiv-xv.


12. The experience of Native American warriors is a conspicuous absence here, but not because alcohol was unproblematic or peripheral to their culture or their experience during the War of 1812. Indeed, these groups have been excluded precisely because alcohol was so central, and because its role was deeply complicated by the racial politics of Aboriginal-White relations. A careful, separate study of this issue is required before any attempt at comparison or integration can be made.


16. Wingfield’s experiences as a prisoner of war were quite different from those experienced by regular soldiers who were often confined in goals. See Bamford and Carroll, eds., *Four Years on the Great Lakes, 1813-1816: The Journal of Lieutenant David Wingfield, Royal Navy* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2009), 105-9.


20. As noted in Graves, *Merry Hearts*, 65n38; Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles*, 109; Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 343. A “gill” was equivalent to four or five ounces. A sailor’s rum ration was, by regulation, diluted with anywhere between four and six parts water. The resulting mixture was referred to as “Grog.” See A.J. Pack, *Nelson’s Blood*.


22. From O’Brien’s biography of Alexander the Great, as quoted in Roth, *Drunk the Night Before*, 1-2.

23. As quoted in Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 20. See also S. B. Cloudman, “Recollections of the Old Time Militia and the Annual General Muster,” *Maine Historical Society Collections*, Third Series, 2 (1906), 331-41. Cloudman noted that after the rum “treat” had been doled out from wooden pails carried around the field, “There was always a noticeable activity in the maneuvering” (224).

24. See note 4, above; see also Warner, “Resolv’d to Drink No More.”


27. Ibid., 7-10. Rorabaugh estimates that of all adult males, half of them drank two-thirds
of all distilled spirits consumed in the 1820s.


31. Fort Niagara Order Book, 12 April 1813, MG24 F12, LAC (hereafter Ft. Niagara O.B.). This note was included by McFeely following the transcript of a Court Martial in which several men were accused of insulting a superior officer and accusing him of cowardice.


33. Mann, Medical Sketches, 38.


37. Mann, Medical Sketches, 122.


42. Brumwell, Redcoats, 19-21, 57-69, 75-77; Holmes, Redcoat: The British Soldier in the

43. Boswell, Life of Samuel Johnson, 236-37. Despite these words of praise, Johnson often spoke very critically of the navy, in particular.

44. Snape, The Redcoat and Religion, 81. Snape is certainly not the only person to characterize alcohol’s role this way. See also, for example, Taylor, The Civil War of 1812, 342-51.

45. For example, the death of two Royal Marines in Halifax after an evening “swilling Calibogus” and drinking three pints of rum. See Pack, Nelson’s Blood, 51-52. Calibogus, or callibogus, was a mixture of spruce beer and rum, brandy, or gin, often served hot with sugar.

46. Pleasants Murphy, “Journal and Day Book,” [1813-14], in William and Mary Quarterly, Second Series, 3 (October 1923), 235.

47. Dunlop, Recollections, 27.

48. LeCouteur, 12 April 1813, in Graves, Merry Hearts, 111. The importance of a well-stocked and managed mess – both for the pleasure and pride it afforded the men – figures conspicuously in this journal.

49. Ibid., March 1812, 54-55.


54. That a charge of mutiny was not brought against these men is surprising, as several witnesses testified that they were making these declarations of solidarity with Farrand as they were “taking up their Arms.” However, over the course of the trial it was revealed they were also preparing for parade (and thus were required to take up their weapons) and that several of the witnesses to the event were, ironically, intoxicated, and therefore gave testimony that could not be trusted.

The “cobb” referred to a large, flat wooden panel which was used to strike offenders “on the bare posterior.” Used quite frequently at Fort Niagara, it may have become a popular punishment because Congress had abolished the lash in the Army in order to encourage enlistment. See John Hare, “Military Punishments in the War of 1812,” Journal of the American Military Institute 4 (Winter 1940): 225-39; Taylor, The Civil War of 1812, 343.


56. R. I. Warner, “Memoirs of Captain John Lampman (1790) and his Wife Mary Secord (1797),” Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records 3 (1927), 130-31. This account also details incidents of excessive drunkenness among civilians during the war. My thanks to Mr. Nicholas Clemens for drawing my attention to this account.

57. As quoted in “Constitution of the British Army as it is, and as it Should Be,” Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine (June, 1835), 357. Dundas spoke thus to the English Parliament in 1817.

58. As quoted in Snape, The Redcoat and Religion, 16. See also Bernard Mandeville, An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour, and the Usefulness of Christianity in War (1732) in which the author concludes that the greatest victories could be achieved by those who were “loose and immoral, if not debauch’d and wicked Fellows” (149).


60. Josiah Woodward, A Soldier’s Monitor: Being Serious Advice to Soldiers to Behave Themselves with a Just Regard to Religion and True Manhood (London, 1722), 28. The first edition of Woodward’s tract was published in the early 1700s, but it was regularly reprinted and circulated in the thousands, well into the nineteenth century, in both Europe and America. As Paul Kopperman notes, it was likely more widely disseminated within the British Army than any other piece of religious literature. See Kopperman, “The Cheapest Pay,” 452.

61. Ft. Niagara O.B., Garrison Court Martial, Serg’t Rogers, 2 April 1813. As punishment, Rogers was reduced in rank and pay for two months.

Sowders was tried for attacking Heafer in defence of his wife who, according to several witnesses, had slapped and attempted to strike the Sergeant with a stick.

63. See, for example, Ft. Niagara O.B., drum-head Court Martial of Samuel Lonas, 6 December 1812; Garrison Court Martial of Corporal Henry, 27 December 1812; Garrison Court Martial of John Anderson, 27-28 December 1812; Courts Martial of Matthew Campbell and Seargent Muir, 6 January 1813; Court Martial of Corporal Leathero, 30 January 1813.


65. Ibid.

66. Holmes, Redcoat, 313.


69. I have no clear evidence that Hutton ever was cashiered, though he left the Navy in June 1813. See Malcomson, Lords of the Lake, 73, 92-93, 143.

70. “Picketing” (also known as the piquet or picquet) was a particularly painful species of punishment which required the prisoner to stand barefoot upon a wooden stake, supporting all (or most) of his weight on his foot. See Hare, “Military Punishments,” 232.

71. Ft. Niagara O.B., Garrison Court Martial of Michael Herrin, 13 December 1813. The serious physical consequences which picketing was known to cause, may have motivated Loomis. See Hare, “Military Punishments.”

72. LeCouteur, 28 February 1812 and 5 February 1813, in Graves, Merry Hearts, 53, 79. For more on corporal punishment in the English army see Holmes, Redcoat, and Coss, All for the King’s Shilling.

73. See Kopperman, “The Cheapest Pay,” 456-57. James Mann’s condemnation of the inebriate soldier reflects this understanding of chronic drinking as well. See Medical Sketches.


75. Ft. Niagara O. B., Garrison Court Martial of Joseph Jackson, 8 February 1813. Jackson was also given two weeks of extra duty and confinement in the guard house at night.


77. The coveted liquor was awarded to whichever man managed to hit “a target the size of a dollar at 100 yards distance.” See Malcomson, A Very Brilliant Affair, 82. Second and third-place marksmen earned a pint and half-pint, respectively.


82. Armstrong to General H. Savage, 1 September 1814, as printed in C.P. Stacey, ed. “Upper Canada at War, 1814: Captain Armstrong Reports,” Ontario History 48, No. 1 (1956), 38, emphasis in original.

83. Benjamin Waterhouse, A Journal of a Young Man of Massachusetts, Late a Surgeon on Board an American Privateer (Boston: Rowe and Hooper, 1816; Reprinted in New York by William Abbatt, 1911), 11.

84. Letter reproduced in the Quebec Mercury of 27 April 1813, as reprinted in The Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier in the Year 1813, Part One, ed. E. A. Cruikshank (Welland, Ont.: Printed by the Welland Tribune for the Lundy’s Lane Historical Society, 1902), 124.

85. Shadrach Byfield, A Narrative of a Light Company Soldier’s Service in the Forty-First Regiment of Foot (1807-1814) (Bradford: John Bubb, 1840), 378. A noggin was the equivalent of a quarter pint. The issue of “rum extraordinary” before battle was a long tradition in the British Army. See Kopperman, “The Cheapest Pay,” 446.
86. Commins, 25 August 1815, in Lord, “War on the Canadian Frontier,” 209. This letter is one of several penned by Commins which conveys to a modern reader (and perhaps to a contemporary one) an excessive bravado which seems intended to polish the grime from a number of rather gruesome episodes in which the author participated.

87. A. Cochran to his mother, 27 July 1812, Andrew Wm. Cochran Fonds, File One, MG24 B16, LAC.

88. Tupper, Life and Correspondence, 259.

89. LeCouteur, 5 February 1813, in Graves, Merry Hearts, 82.

90. Dunlop, Recollections, 97-98.

91. See, for example, Joel Stone to Col. Lethbridge, 25 October 1812, Joel Stone Family Fonds, F536 MU 2892, Archives of Ontario; Sheppard, Plunder, Profit, and Paroles, 109; Taylor, The Civil War of 1812, 344-47.


95. Ft. Niagara O.B., Garrison Court Martial of Stouts and Herd, 7 January 1813. The men were found guilty, deprived of the whiskey rations for two weeks, and ordered to “do the police duty of their quarters for said time.” I suspect that this duty involved cleaning latrines.

96. Douglas, Medical Topography, 78.

97. LeCouteur, 27 November 1813 in Graves, Merry Hearts. 157; LeCouteur had been dining with Commodore James Yeo, Chauncey’s British nemesis, and several other captains of the lake fleet.

98. Douglas, Medical Topography, 92-93.

99. Mann, Medical Sketches, 14.

100. For a more extensive list see Sarah Williams, “The Use of Beverage Alcohol as Medicine, 1790-1860,” Journal of Studies on Alcohol 41 (1980): 543-66.


102. See Beaumont 13 September, 1812, in Miller, Beaumont’s Formative Years, 10. See also Douglas, Medical Topography, passim; and Mann, Medical Sketches, passim. Ammonia, turpentine, lavender and ginger were also considered stimulants. See Williams, “The Use of Beverage Alcohol,” 545.

103. Mann, Medical Sketches, 13.

104. Douglas, Medical Topography, 95.

105. Byfield, A Narrative, 91-92. Byfield reported rather manfully that “the operation was tedious and painful, but I was enabled to bear it pretty well.” Not long after the operation, he was to be found “play[ing] a game of fives for a quart of rum.”


107. Mann, Medical Sketches, 35-36.

108. Ibid., 37.
109. Douglas, Medical Topography, 81-82.
110. LeCouteur, April 1813, in Graves, Merry Hearts, 104.
111. Rush, An Inquiry, 3. Rush did allow for some wiggle room in this assertion about cold-weather drinking. See also his letter “To the Officers of the Army of the United American States: Directions for Preserving the Health of Soldiers,” 142-43.
112. Mann, Medical Sketches, 37.

113. See Ft. Niagara O.B., Garrison Court Martial records for Janus Shaddock, Loring Pattil, and Charles Potter, 5 January 1813, and for Thomas Reading and John Brown, 13 December 1813; Taylor, 343-44.
114. Taylor, 336-37; Ft. Niagara O.B., Garrison Court Martial of James Stranahan, 13 December 1813 (charged with drunkenness and being absent without leave, Stranahan abandoned his work party to visit a tavern and drink half a pint of whiskey). Other descriptions of taverns and sutlers can be found, for example, in Byfield, A Narrative, 92; Mann, Medical Sketches, 37; Murphy, “Journal,” 233; Pack, Nelson’s Blood, 56.
117. J. Fenimore Cooper, ed. Ned Myers; Or, A Life Before the Mast (New York: Putnam, 1912), 55. Myers actually identified the body, incorrectly, as that of British General Isaac Brock (Brock had died the previous fall in Queenston, but a ship named in his honour was in York, under construction at the time, which may account for Myers’ confusion). That it was indeed Pike is confirmed in a letter written by Lieutenant George W. Runk of the 6th U.S. Infantry, in which he describes the Brigadier General as having been “preserved [sic] in a Hogshead of Spirits” (Runk to Senator Lambert, 14 May 1813, Private Collection of Brian Murphy, Santa Fe, New Mexico). For an alternative interpretation of this consumption of the preserving spirits, suggesting a rather more ritualistic motive linked to Pike’s reputation and heroism, refer to Lafferty, “Alcohol – Cause and Cure: Dr. James Mann and the Practice of Medicine during the War of 1812,” presented at the 6th International Conference on the History of Alcohol and Drugs, Buffalo, June 2010.

Pike was not the only man to have been thus preserved for transport to home soil. Horatio Nelson was preserved in a cask of brandy after his death at Trafalgar, and popular legend has it that sailors on board HMS Victory consumed the brandy while en route. British Commodore James Yeo was also thus preserved after his death in 1816, at age 36. Yeo had been sailing home from Jamaica when he contracted a fever. See Malcomson, Lords of the Lake, 322.
120. John Owen, Chaplain General of the British Forces to des Brisay, 18 November 1811, Theophile des Brisay Fonds, MG24 F9, LAC. On the British Chaplaincy, see Michael Snape, The Royal Army Chaplains’ Department, 1796-1953: Clergy under Fire (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008)