

America's rival to Laura Secord shines light on women in history

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As insults go, it's a pretty mild one. But as Canadians gear up to mark the 200th anniversary of the battle that secured our future as an independent country, a gauntlet has been thrown down, and the bravery of our most famous heroine has been dismissed as a mere walk in the park.

Trashing the iconic Laura Secord has proved to be an effective way to generate attention for Betsy Doyle, a previously unheralded American patriot who apparently went the extra mile for her own country during the War of 1812. Now news reports are pitting the feats of one heroine against the other, with headlines trumpeting "SUR-PRISE ATTACK" and "Round Two."

I forgive the hyperbole – it made me read the story. And I don't blame Catherine Emerson, either. She's the U.S. historian who's responsible for promoting Betsy Doyle's compelling heroics. (The woman trekked 400 kilometres – with her children! She loaded guns – with red-hot cannonballs!)

Apparently, Emerson made her disparaging comment about the lameness of our Laura during a presentation to a group of New York lawmakers. My guess is she was merely seeking to underline how unfortunate it was that Betsy Doyle's country had failed to recognize her feats. Contrasting the U.S. heroine's low profile with the celebration heaped on Laura Secord this side of the border was no doubt designed to shame them into correcting the oversight.

I hope it works. Because really, in the context of a historical event that boasts a host of male heroes – and a media culture that focuses a lot of attention on under-dressed women – surely there's room for one or two more fullyclothed, female role models.

Chances are that the War of 1812 inspired heroism in many other women whose lives were profoundly affected by the conflict, but whose stories haven't yet been told. History is full of amazing women who – while they may once have been written out of the official records – are now being posthumously feted for their intelligence, inventions and artistry.

French sculptor Camille Claudel has recently emerged from the shadow of her lover, the more famous Rodin; author Beatrix Potter apparently had some claim to the discovery of penicillin; and Einstein's first wife, Mileva Maric, seems to have contributed to his Nobel-winning research.

As for Laura Secord, even if the length of her 32-kilometre walk pales in comparison with the 400 kilometres clocked by Betsy Doyle, that doesn't make her act any less heroic. (You try negotiating a 10-hour journey through dangerous territory on an unseasonably hot June day sporting an anklelength dress and inappropriate shoes.) And the cow that she was supposed to have dragged along with her for cover while crossing enemy lines? That was a bit of fiction, apparently invented by a government official.

They say history is written by the victors, but even victorious women – unless they happened to be queens – generally lacked the “room of one's own” that would have permitted them such a luxury.

When Laura Secord returned home after warning General Fitzgibbon of the impending American attack, it was to five children, an invalid husband and no washing machine, microwave or nearby supermarket.

And even if she'd had the time, she was apparently a woman of admirable discretion and humility, declining to boast of her exploits for many years after the fact for reasons of national and – no doubt – personal security.

Her silence, and history's chronic erasure of women's contribution on all sorts of fronts, is given new context by recent research into the persistent under-representation of

women's voices in mainstream media two centuries later.

Informed Opinions, a non-profit project that helps to connect female experts to journalists, has found that even in 2011, qualified women are much more reluctant than their male counterparts to provide commentary and analysis to the news media when asked.

Lack of time remains an issue, but so does the tendency to discount the value of their knowledge or the importance of their contribution. Dozens of the more than 200 women surveyed have also indicated a discomfort with any activity that might be seen as selfpromotional. This is unfortunate, not just because it will perpetuate the absence of attention to women's accomplishments, but because it robs us of their capacity to help make sense of the many pressing issues we face.

So I salute Catherine Emerson for raising awareness of Betsy Doyle's story; her heroism is worth celebrating, and in no way diminishes Laura Secord's. We all benefit from inspirational role models, of any gender, from any age.

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