

# Merry Hearts Make Light Days

The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot

Edited by Donald E. Graves

In June 1812, seventeen-year-old John Le Couteur, an officer in a Canadian regiment of the British army, arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to learn that war had broken out between the United States and Great Britain. For the next three years Le Couteur campaigned from Halifax to Fort Erie, and he left an entertaining memoir of his experiences full of tales of storm-tossed voyages, arduous winter marches, battles on land and water, the perils of courtship, Canadian high and low society – and the occasional ghost story – played out against the splendid landscapes of North America.

Though young by today's standards, John Le Couteur was a brave and capable leader respected by the men he commanded, not least because he detested the punishment by flogging so common in the army of his time. Off duty, he was a charming young man who enjoyed a good prank, was a popular guest at parties, loved dancing and fancied himself in love with almost every pretty girl he met. Engagingly soft-hearted, he recalls how he nursed back to health a sick and wounded kitten.

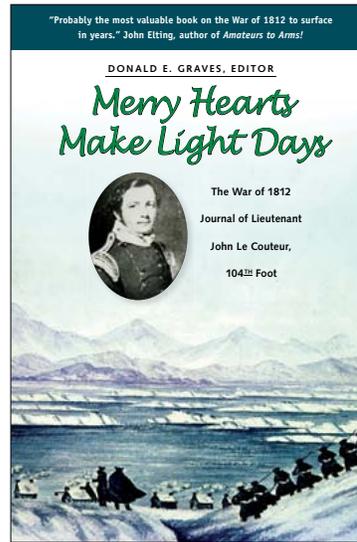
His journal includes the epic fifty-day overland march he and his regiment made from New Brunswick to Kingston, Ontario, in the dead of winter, when reinforcements were direly needed in Upper Canada. When news arrived in 1814 that the war was over, he and his fellow officers entertained their American counterparts to dinner, and later Le Couteur travelled through New York State on his way back to England, recording his memorable impressions of his trip down the Hudson Valley.

A man of the Regency period (a time of public manners and private passions), Le Couteur recounts his true-life adventures with drama and action, laughter and love in an easy style that reads more like a novel than a historical memoir. Not only do many recent books on the War of 1812 quote his colourful journal, but Johnny himself appeared as a major character in the recent television documentary on "The War of 1812."

**Publication history:** *Merry Hearts Make Light Days* was first published by Carleton University Press in 1993 and went through three printings.

**Donald E. Graves**, one of Canada's best known military historians, is the author, co-author or editor of 18 full-length books dealing primarily with the War of 1812 and the Second World War. His detailed studies on the battles of Lundy's Lane (*Where Right and Glory Lead!*) and Crysler's Farm (*Field of Glory*) are classics of musket-period warfare. His most recent books are *Dragon Rampant*, the history of the Royal Welch Fusiliers in the Napoleonic Wars, and *Fix Bayonets!*, about the remarkable military career of Thomas Pearson, a Welch Fusilier and "regular

*John Le Couteur observed when he met some of his American opponents: "How uncomfortably like a civil war it seemed when we were in good-humoured friendly converse...."*



## What reviewers said about the first edition ...

"... the most valuable book on the War of 1812 to surface in years. A young and gallant officer who did his duty, and a little more, but remained high-hearted throughout, speaks ... in words ... as exciting as the deeds they describe." **Colonel John Elting, author of *Amateurs to Arms!: A Military History of the War of 1812***

"A unique and original document, magnificently edited ... a must not only for every historian of the War of 1812 but also for the general reader interested in that conflict and early 19th century Canadian social history." **Wesley Turner, author of *High Command in the Canadas: British Military Leadership in the War of 1812***

## One of the five best books ...

In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2011, **Alan Taylor, author of *The Civil War of 1812***, named *Merry Hearts Make Light Days* one of the five best books on the War of 1812:

"Superbly edited by a leading Canadian military historian, this journal introduces readers to the good company of a British officer, Lt. John Le Couteur, a humane and gregarious man caught up in the miseries of war. In September 1813, he took a message to an American army camp. Upon meeting his foes, Le Couteur marveled: 'Strange indeed did it appear to me to find so many names, "familiar household words," as enemies—the very names of Officers in our own army. How uncomfortably like a civil war.' He bantered with an American officer just returned from shooting birds: 'Much pleasanter Sport, isn't it, than shooting one's own kindred and language.' But a month later, an atrocity by American troops led him to denounce them as deserving no mercy in battle: 'The rascals, they are worse than Frenchmen.' So said the British officer with a French name."

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Tartar" who makes several appearances in *Merry Hearts Make Light Days*. Graves is currently working on the third volume of his trilogy, "Forgotten Soldiers: The War of 1812 in the North," which will cover the 1814 siege of Fort Erie and battle of Plattsburgh as well as lesser engagements. Donald Graves is the managing director of Ensign Heritage Group, a consulting firm that provides military historical expertise to historic sites, government departments, film companies and individuals. He resides in the Mississippi Valley of Upper Canada with his author wife, Dianne.