

**Sacred Heart University**

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**From the Selected Works of Jennifer McLaughlin**

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## McLaughlin Kicks Off Academic Lecture Series

Jennifer McLaughlin, *Sacred Heart University*



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# McLaughlin Kicks Off Academic Lecture Series



McLaughlin presents her paper, *Reflecting on the Bicentennial of the War of 1812*.

News Story: February 1, 2012

At Sacred Heart University, History Professor Jennifer McLaughlin kicked off the Academic Research Showcase portion of the Presidential Inaugural Lecture Series on Wednesday, January 25, with a presentation of her paper, *Reflecting on the Bicentennial of the War of 1812*. Representing the College of Arts and Sciences, McLaughlin shared her findings before a group of faculty, staff, students, family and friends.

She took the opportunity to share some reflections on the bicentennial of the War of 1812 while also connecting her topic to the inaugural theme of "A Time for New Beginnings." She began by pointing out that most Americans would be hard put to say why the War of 1812 was declared (to fight the practice of impressment by the British – capturing American seamen and forcing them into the British Navy) or even that the National Anthem was written during that war.

She noted that while some bicentennial celebrations of the war have been planned in the states where much of the fighting took place – with Maryland leading the way – there is little to no activity in New England. One reason might be that New Englanders were not particularly behind the war, and there were reports of possible treason as nearby as New London.

The British Navy was in dire need of personnel for a number of reasons, McLaughlin said. One was that the U.S. Navy provided better economic opportunity. "Why enlist with the Royal Navy for an indefinite period of time, risk loss of rank or pay, or wait for months if not years to be paid in the first place? As a consequence of the needs of the Royal Navy, American seamen found themselves relatively easy prey, particularly after 1803," McLaughlin said.

Following such incidents as the death of James Pierce on his sloop just outside New York Harbor and the firing on the U.S.S. *Chesapeake* in Norfolk, Virginia, by the H.M.S. *Leopard* – resulting in more American deaths – the United States prepared for war.

McLaughlin told the audience that some consider the War of 1812 to be a civil war, because it revealed the divisions that existed in American society at that time. For example, many Americans who lived near

the Canadian border opposed the war. Not only that, but the ethnic background that so many Americans shared with their British counterparts in the Royal Navy complicated the relationship between captors and captives, she said.

The war lasted from June 1812 to early January 1815, when Andrew Jackson led American troops into the Battle of New Orleans. However, many historians consider the war a draw as the Americans did not make great strides in their professed goals of free trade and rights for sailors.

In looking at whether the war provided “new beginnings” for the United States, Britain or their relationship with one another, McLaughlin pointed to one theory that proclaims victory for the United States because of the impact the war had on the native allies of the British. This allowed the Americans to move farther west without fear, because the war had removed groups of Indians from the picture.



Another possible new beginning for America involved the decline of the Federalist Party. McLaughlin noted that according to historian Alan Taylor, the war-ending Treaty of Ghent spelled the end for Federalists, not only because of their association with Britain, their opposition to the war and the Hartford Convention, but because the second victory against Britain resulted in a new nationalism that could envision a continental American future without interference from the British any longer.

While other historians have concluded that the Treaty demonstrated that the war had been a futile attempt by the Republicans to challenge Great Britain once again, McLaughlin concluded that even if the status quo remained following the war, the ideological impact of a second victory in a second war for independence seemed to be enough for the United States.

McLaughlin was honored to kick off the Academic Research Showcase. She first became interested in the War of 1812 while in graduate school at William & Mary where she had an assistantship on the Papers of James Monroe. “I was responsible for reading all of his correspondence during the years he was Secretary of State and Secretary of War. While he was at State, he received letters from consuls all over the world asking for help dealing with American sailors impressed into service for the Royal Navy. That got me interested in the role of those sailors in American culture and, of course, impressment led me to the War of 1812,” she said.

