

## *The Astonishing General: The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock* by Wesley B. Turner

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Volume 104, Number 1, Spring 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065399ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065399ar>

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### Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this review

Grodzinski, J. R. (2012). Review of [*The Astonishing General: The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock* by Wesley B. Turner]. *Ontario History*, 104(1), 211–213.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065399ar>

war in 1812. The conflict resulted in a much “sharper distinction” between Upper Canada and the United States and ensured that postwar Canada would develop along the model of empire rather than republic (pp. 457-58).

It is Taylor’s characterization of the fighting of 1812-1814 as a civil war that sets this book apart from other treatments of the conflict. His argument is both convincing and well documented. In addition to the linguistic and cultural similarities of the opponents, many Upper Canadians were former citizens of the United States. They had arrived in a post-Revolution flow of Americans seeking free land, and the allegiances of these “late Loyalists” were often questionable. Indeed, some overtly supported the Americans, and uncertainty about their inclinations greatly complicated defense against invasions, particularly at places like Detroit and Niagara.

The organization of this book deals effectively with the geographically scattered fronts along which fighting occurred in each of three years of warfare. The book is divided into chapters that focus on specific areas or topics and is then further broken down into shorter sections recounting military and political events, usually from the perspectives of participants and with an emphasis on relations between soldiers and civilians. Although this approach presupposes at least a general understanding of the War of 1812 by readers, it allows events to be presented in

such a way as to clearly explain their relationship to the author’s vision of this “civil war.”

Taylor’s narrative is clear and very much to the point. He has little sympathy for the military blundering and politically motivated strategies of the United States and is often brutally frank in his assessments of them. British and Canadian mistakes are recounted as well, but the author clearly has no regard for any claims of a military victory by the United States. He further maintains that histories written on both sides of the border reflect postwar nationalism and obscure the divisive elements that contributed to making this a civil war.

Taylor has a great command of the sources documenting the War of 1812, and his book includes an extensive and useful bibliography. His treatment reflects a good understanding of the people and places of the time, although his consistent use of “Detroit Valley” and “Niagara Valley” to describe the regions around those two large rivers is peculiar. This book is very well written in a style that makes it highly accessible. It should be read by all students of the War of 1812 and of Ontario history. It is highly recommended.

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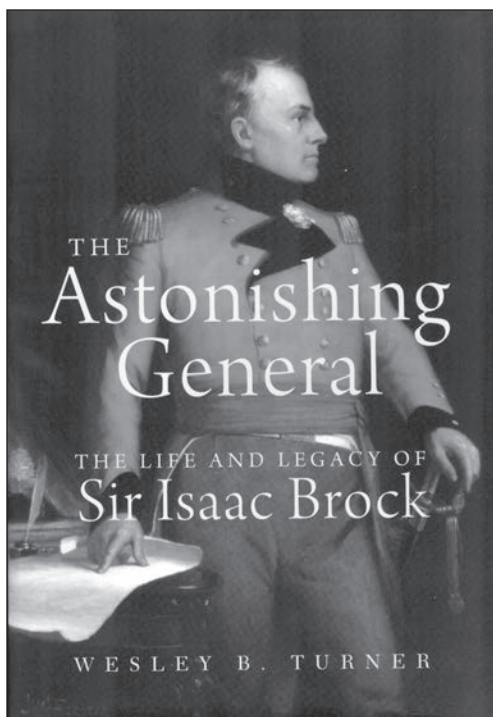
### *The Astonishing General: The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock*

by Wesley B. Turner

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011. 369 pages, illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index.  
\$35.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-777-4. ([www.dundurn.com](http://www.dundurn.com))

In his 1999 study *British Generals of the War of 1812*, historian Wesley Turner explored the reasons why Major-General Isaac Brock, who held responsibility for the military defence and civil administra-

tion of Upper Canada, has emerged as the iconic general of that conflict. No other British commander from the war has been as frequently and as publically commemorated as Brock and interest in his life is



so extensive that despite the many books, articles, documentaries and collectables, including postage stamps and an action figure, devoted to him, two new biographies have appeared in the last year. One is the subject of this review and the other is *A Matter of Honour: The Life, Campaigns and Generalship of Isaac Brock* by British historian Jonathan Riley. Turner explains that in preparing this biography he has “something different to say” (p. 9) about this subject.

Turner presents Brock as the most unlikely of heroes: his high birth and unimpressive combat record do not have the makings of a glorious figure. It was in death that Brock’s glorification came to life as memories of his character and personal bravery spread and transformed him into a Canadian hero.

One brief chapter describes Brock’s upbringing and early career. In contrast Riley

devoted four chapters to his early life and postings in England, the West Indies and on campaign service in Holland (1799) and at Copenhagen (1801). If leadership is a factor in creating Brock’s fame, Turner’s hasty treatment of the impression made upon him by Lieutenant-General Sir Ralph Abercromby and Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, his superior commanders respectively during these two expeditions, does nothing to illustrate the significance of this formative stage of his career (p. 29-31).

Almost half of the book is devoted to Brock’s service in Upper and Lower Canada between 1802 and 1812. Despite his professional success, advancing from lieutenant-colonel to major-general within nine years, Brock, like any keen officer of the time, longed for an appointment to Wellington’s army in the Iberian Peninsula. Deciding to make the best of his situation, Brock set himself to his duties in Canada and Turner takes us through the challenges he faced: commanding a battalion, as acting-commander-in-chief of the Canadas, and as commander of Upper Canada. He is seen dealing with the more annoying aspects of military administration, undertaking diplomatic talks with Native nations, even enjoying the pleasures of gardening and social events. This is familiar territory, drawn from the usual sources and is not new.

According to the author, Brock, aided by a few key individual such as Tecumseh, prevented the American conquest of Canada in 1812. Without Brock’s leadership Detroit would not have been captured, leaving American Brigadier-General William Hull free “to have advanced deep into Upper Canada, outflanking Fort Mackinac to the north and the Niagara front,” leaving “Upper Canada west of Kingston” in American hands (p. 235). The achievement of such a magnificent victory is improbable since the American land forces were wholly

unsuited for offensive operations against a European trained enemy that enjoyed control of the inland seas. Hull was as much a victim of his own phobias as he was of British, Canadian and Native actions in the Western District. His withdrawal from Upper Canada to Detroit was of his own accord, and American forces collecting along the Niagara frontier and near the border of Lower Canada were in disarray.

An original contribution to our understanding of the War of 1812 could have been made by exploring the strategy to defend British North America. Brock's experience as a former acting commander-in-chief and his efforts to prepare Upper Canada for war placed him in a unique position to contribute to this process. Turner repeats worn arguments that Brock's superior, Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost was predisposed to a defensive strategy (p. 103) while ignoring the instructions sent by London to the governor and commander-in-chief of British North America to do just that. Prevost's May 1812 defensive appreciation revealed his confidence that Upper Canada could be defended, so long as the Americans were incapable of mounting a determined attack on the province. He also believed limited tactical offensives were essential to stabilize the military situation. Indeed both men seem to have shared similar ideas towards the defence of the Canadas, but their relationship was complicated by their not

having met, an important factor omitted in this book. This discussion is essential to understanding Brock's achievements, especially as his strategy advocating the expansion of crown authority over American territory was one that no one was calling for, either in Britain or North America. It went well beyond anything that Prevost envisioned. Inept generalship and poor preparation on the part of the Americans (not considered in this book) allowed Brock to get away with a potentially dangerous course of action, a factor that is often overlooked by historians.

The reasons for Brock's enduring legacy are just as unclear. Turner cites accounts by two junior officers reflecting on the irreparable loss Brock's death brought to the British war effort, newspaper articles that presented him as a hero in the post-war years and popular songs recalling Brock's bravery as helping establish his legacy. Is that the stuff by which legends are created?

*The Astonishing General* presents the life and legacy of Major-General Isaac Brock in a traditional manner that rarely ventures outside the parameters established in previous biographies and in the end, it says little that is new.

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### *"Thus Fell Tecumseh"*

by Frank E. Kuron

Toledo: Kuron Publishing, 2011. xv + 335pp. \$US21.95 softcover.

ISBN 978-0-615-425522-2. ([www.kuronpublishing.com](http://www.kuronpublishing.com))

A large number of publications, websites, and exhibits have been appearing in association with the bicentennial of the War of 1812, produced by scholars, heritage con-

sultants, and staff at historical agencies, as well as by re-enactors and amateurs. Many of these works range from mediocre through disappointing and on to grim, while a small