

## “*Thus Fell Tecumseh*” by Frank E. Kuron

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[See table of contents](#)

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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

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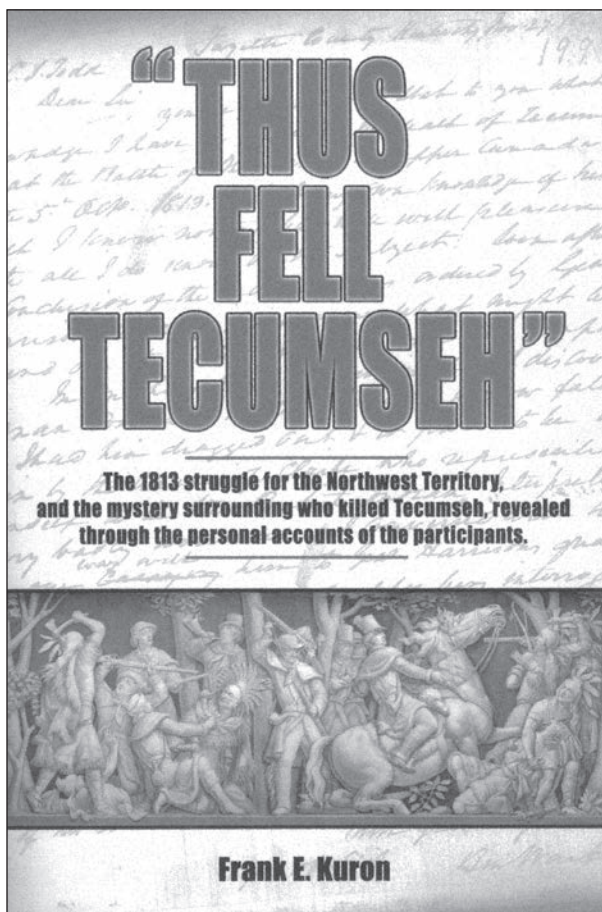
A large number of publications, websites, and exhibits have been appearing in association with the bicentennial of the War of 1812, produced by scholars, heritage con-

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

number are very good indeed. One of these projects is the book under review. It is a self-published effort by an amateur enthusiast concerned to answer the long-debated question of who killed the famous Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, at the battle of Moraviantown in Upper Canada. The text suffers from many of the problems common to non-professional efforts, such as a limited appreciation of the details of the conflict and its historiography. Nevertheless, *“Thus Fell Tecumseh”* is an interesting reminder of popular American perspectives on the conflict and provides useful insights into the claims for the distinction of putting to death one of the most celebrated

participants in the war.

Tecumseh and his half-brother, Tenskwatawa, wanted to halt the alienation of aboriginal lands in the Old Northwest of the Indiana and Michigan territories and neighbouring regions, as well as assert indigenous control of the relationships between whites and natives in order to protect First Nations societies from the devastation caused by the impoverishment, exploitation, and social degradation that arose through Native-newcomer relations. They began to form a confederacy of like-minded people within the aboriginal world in 1805, which Americans saw as a threat to their desires to open new territories for settlement. A major clash between the confederacy and the United States occurred in November 1811 at the battle of Tippecanoe. Naturally, when the US declared war on the Great Britain in June 1812, the British, Tecumseh’s followers, and other Native peoples allied against their common enemy, achieving considerable success on the Detroit front during the first months of the conflict. The tide began to turn in that region through the spring and summer of 1813 when they failed to capture two important forts in Ohio. Then in September 1813, the American naval squadron on Lake Erie defeated the smaller Royal Navy force, which cut British communications lines to the west from the Niagara Peninsula. Without sufficient food or supplies, the British and Natives withdrew eastwards from the Detroit River region, pursued by a large American force, which caught them near today’s Chatham, Ontario in October. In the ensuing battle, the Americans defeated their opponents and Tecumseh fell



in action. With his death and United States ascendancy in the region, the dream of an independent aboriginal homeland in the Old Northwest largely evaporated as various Native communities negotiated peace with the United States while the Anglo-American war continued. Thus, conditions in that theatre made it almost impossible when British and American diplomats negotiated a peace treaty in 1814 for Great Britain to demand that the United States give up land to the First Nations without continuing hostilities into 1815. This situation simply was not in the best interests of the United Kingdom or its Canadian colonies, because the British otherwise had achieved their primary objectives after fighting a successful defensive war. Therefore, the Treaty of Ghent, based on the principle of restoring the pre-war status quo, only re-established Native rights as they had existed in 1811, which was less than what Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa had wanted.

Tecumseh was such a significant figure that people hungered for details of his death, while a number of veterans of the battle either claimed or were credited with shooting him. Many individuals, then and since, gave the distinction to a prominent Kentuckian, Colonel Richard Johnson, at least in terms of probability if not necessarily in fact. Johnson's putative role in killing Tecumseh even became an election issue in the 1830s when he ran for vice president of the United States, with Johnson's supporters using it to bolster his standing among voters and his detractors dismissing the claim as political twaddle. (During the 1836 campaign that saw him become Martin Van Buren's vice president, a regrettable jingle entered the popular realm across the US: "Rumpsey dumpsey, rumpsey dumpsey, Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh.")

In order to determine who was responsible for Tecumseh's death, Frank Kuron spent six years analysing a large number of accounts, beginning with the first eye-wit-

ness reports to appear after the battle, and the author quotes these sources extensively throughout his text. Examining the various documents and assessing them in light of secondary sources and his own analyses forms the focus of the book (although Mr. Kuron also provides readers with a general background to the campaign in the Detroit theatre). After assessing his data, the author concludes that, given the confusion of battle, conflicting stories, and questions about whether the Americans correctly identified a particular body as Tecumseh's, we simply cannot know who killed the legendary Shawnee hero. For instance, eye-witnesses disagreed over which body was his, whether he was dressed plainly or extravagantly, and most people on the scene of course did not know what he looked like. Furthermore, the Americans mutilated the Native dead left on the field, which made identification even more difficult, while there also is a tradition that cannot be dismissed out-of-hand that Tecumseh's acquaintances spirited his corpse away to prevent his enemies from finding it. Frank Kuron's view that we cannot know who killed Tecumseh is a reasonable one in light of the documentary evidence, but also because of how random and impersonal most deaths were on the battlefields of the black powder era (which then, as now, also included losses to 'friendly' fire). Much has been written about Tecumseh, but in exploring the details of the Shawnee leader's death, Frank Kuron's book pairs best with a text that continues the story from the Shawnee leader's fall through the many decades of controversy that have surrounded the question of what happened to his body and where his earthly remains rest today, Guy St.-Denis' *Tecumseh's Bones*, published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2005.

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