

Tecumseh & Brock: The War of 1812 by James Laxer

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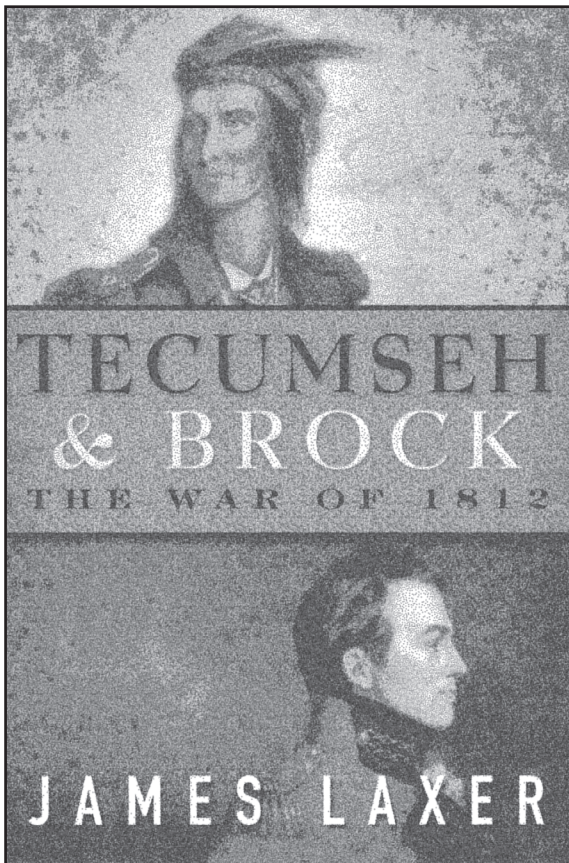
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Tecumseh & Brock

The War of 1812

By James Laxer

Toronto: House of Anansi, 2012. 348 pages, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 978-1-770891-85-1 (www.houseofanansi.com)

Major-General Isaac Brock has emerged as the iconic figure of the War of 1812. He is often portrayed as being a “brilliant strategist” whose loss caused irreparable damage to the British war effort. Wesley Turner named Brock as the most significant British commander of the war, the one who prevented the American conquest of Upper Canada. It was his leadership that changed the entire course of the war. This hagiography has created the impression that it was Brock, and not anyone else, who set operational plans and priorities for the defence of British North America. Similarly, Shawnee chieftain Tecumseh is presented as a powerful figure, whose friendship and political alliance with Brock helped to secure what

would become the country of Canada.

In *Tecumseh and Brock*, political scientist James Laxer presents unoriginal, and at times tired, perspectives of Brock and Tecumseh, and of the War of 1812, mirroring this uncritical analysis. Contrary to the claim that Brock “prepared the Canadas for the hostilities against the Americans” (p. 76), it was Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, the Captain General and Governor-in-Chief of British North America, and not Brock, who developed a coherent and reasonable strategy for the defence of the Canadas. His plan integrated the requirements for secured communications, fortified points, naval control of waterways and logistics. Prevost rejected the “conventional wisdom,” (p. 116) that Upper Canada could not be defended—a view that Brock once supported—and believed he likely could defend Upper Canada. The only condition under which he contemplated abandoning the province was if he was faced by an overwhelming American offensive.

The examination of Tecumseh also follows traditional lines, while forgetting that his goal was to disrupt the American settlement of territory belonging to the Americans, and then sever it from the United States to create a Native state. Drawing the British, and Brock, into this struggle helped create one of the causes for the war. The Western Confederacy assisted the British in maintaining their presence along the western fringes of Upper Canada; however, it was the peoples of the Grand River, Tyendinaga, Akwesasne, Kanestake and Kahnawake that made a greater contribution to the defence of both Canadas, an important distinction that is ignored in this book. The fate of the Western Confederacy was sealed by the inability of Britain to extend its strategic reach to the interior of the North American continent—a stark

reality that became evident following the British naval defeat on Lake Erie and Tecumseh’s death, and one that was not lost to political leaders and diplomats from both sides.

There are many errors in this book, too many to present here. The British occupation of Washington was not inspired by the American attack on York (p. 257). In 1815, Prevost was not “ordered by the Prince Regent to appear before a court martial,” and instead requested proceedings to clear his name. There is no mention of Commodore Sir James Yeo’s refusal to equip the British naval squadron on Lake Champlain, and he certainly did not, as the author claims, “energetically” undertake “the task of fitting out and manning British ships on Lake ... Erie” (p. 190). What of his preparation of a lengthy transcript of a supposed “court martial” of Prevost, ‘conducted’ after the former governor’s death, exonerating Yeo of any wrongdoing during his time in Canada, and laying all the blame on Prevost?

The sources used in the preparation of this book are the cause of these faults. The notes make repeated references to well-used sources, and there no evidence of original research. American secondary literature figures prominently, particularly in regard to strategy on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. American historians place undue emphasis on these campaigns, and the outcomes at Baltimore and New Orleans, and usually ignore the context of British strategy in both regions, which was focussed on securing the frontier of the Canadas prior to the opening of the peace negotiations. The offensives in the Chesapeake Bay were to support this goal by drawing U.S. troops away from the northern theatre. No reference is made to the important re-evaluation of British strategy and the wartime leadership of Sir George Prevost by J. Mackay Hitsman

(a book which appears in the bibliography but is not quoted), and any literature questioning Brock's conduct is ignored. Many notable studies of strategy, land and naval campaigns and battles, and the maritime economic war, by historians Rory Muir, Robin Reilly, Robert Malcomson, and Fay Kert, just to name a few, are absent, and the absence of the collection of naval documents published by the U.S. Naval Historical Centre is a significant omission.

The publication of this book coincided with the beginning of the bicentenary of the War of 1812, and like so many titles seeking a market share of this event, *Tecumseh and Brock* rides over heavily trodden territory and, despite the praise given it in several newspaper reviews, it offers little for serious students of the War of 1812.

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Redcoated Ploughboys

The Volunteer Battalion of
Incorporated Militia of Up-
per Canada, 1813-1815

By Richard Feltoe

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2012. 432 pages, illustrations, 65 illustrations, 35 maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paperback. (www.dundurnpress.com)

It was not until the conclusion of the war against Napoleon, in the spring of 1814, that Britain could reinforce its army in the Canadas to a level where it finally outnumbered the U.S. Army in size. Until then, British commanders in North America looked to the manpower resources of Upper and Lower Canada to augment their numbers. Unfortunately, inadequate training, discipline and equipment made the sedentary militia unsuitable for employment in the line, leaving the authorities to establish another type of militia organization, the incorporated or provincial unit, raised from volunteers who would serve for the duration of the conflict, and that

would be trained, armed and equipped like the regular troops. Between March and June 1813, the Upper Canada legislature approved the creation of several incorporated militia units, including the Volunteer Battalion of Incorporated Militia of Upper Canada—which fought in a number of actions, including Lundy's Lane and the siege of Fort George—and whose story is told in this book.

At first glance, *Redcoated Ploughboys* appears to be an impressive work. Closer examination, however, casts doubts on the quality of the research and presentation of the story. For example, the many original maps—there are 35 of them—throughout the book appear instructive and superior to any produced in years. Closer examination, however, reveals considerable licence was taken in the interpretation of the documentary record, and in assumptions made regarding unit movements. For example, the placement of the American and British pickets and the routes used by the two columns in the 24 August 1813 reconnaissance of Fort George cannot be reconciled with the general order issued the night before the operation was to take place, outlining the dispositions for the troops involved, and reports issued afterwards.