COMMEMORATING TECUMSEH

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ABSTRACT

Tecumseh has inspired many tributes in the past two centuries. In Upper Canada, he was quickly adopted as a symbol of the colony's resistance to American invasion, becoming a major figure in a colonial nation-building discourse. Examining the literature produced in Upper Canada, this paper argues that the Shawnee leader's legacy has been appropriated in the service of the colonization process that he spent his life trying to stop. As Canadians reflect on the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, it is appropriate to ask what it means to commemorate Tecumseh in Canada at this time.

RÉSUMÉ

Tecumseh a inspiré plusieurs hommages dans les deux derniers siècles. Au Haut-Canada, il fut rapidement adopté comme un symbole de résistance de la colonie face à l'invasion américaine, devenant une figure majeure dans le discours colonial de l'édification de la nation. En examinant la littérature produite par le Haut-Canada, ce texte argumente que le legs du leader de Shawnee a été approprié au profit du processus de colonisation qu'il a passé sa vie à tenter d'arrêter. Tandis que les Canadiens célèbrent le 200e anniversaire de la guerre de 1812, il est approprié de demander la signification de la commémoration de Tecumseh au Canada de nos jours.

The commemoration of Tecumseh, the brilliant Shawnee warrior, leader, and pan-Indigenous organizer, has a long history. From the early nineteenth century to the present, he has inspired biographies, commentaries, and literary productions, most of them from non-Indigenous people.[1] American, British, and Canadian authors have penned tributes to his courage, vision, and leadership. Indeed, he has been lionized by a series of German authors as well. His biographer, John Sugden, notes that no other Indigenous leader in North American history has been the subject of as many books, popular and scholarly alike. His image has been pressed into service for many purposes—nation-building discourses, anti-American propaganda, justification of the colonial project, entertainment, even the promotion of Nazi values in Germany.[2] As Canadians reflect on the 200th anniversary of the war that ended his life, it is worth posing questions about what it means to commemorate Tecumseh in Canada at this time, under these socio-political circumstances, and in consideration of the historical contexts that shaped his life.

There are good reasons for Tecumseh's enduring fame. He was a man of exceptional ability who combined remarkable skills in diplomacy, oratory, and military strategy with courage, purpose, and charisma. He impressed everyone he met, friend and foe alike, and the earliest testimonies to his virtues were produced while he was still alive. His greatest adversary, US General William Harrison, called him "one of those uncommon geniuses which spring up occasionally to produce revolutions, and overturn the established order of things".[3] The British commander of Upper Canada, General Isaac Brock, wrote shortly after meeting him, "a more sagacious or more gallant Warrior does not I believe exist. He was the admiration of every one who conversed with him …"[4]

Tecumseh is prominent in the current commemorations of the War of 1812. Most of the online texts that describe his participation in the war state clearly that his reason for joining the British was to continue his long struggle against the aggressive expansion of the United States—not to "fight for Canada".[5] It is possible that he had a particular antipathy to the American "Long Knives," who had killed his father, his older brother, and many others who opposed further encroachment. The Americans' massive dispossession of the Shawnee and neighbouring nations in Tecumseh's lifetime had been rapid and ruthless, accomplished primarily by means of brute force and bloodshed, combined with coerced treaties. Yet Tecumseh had also witnessed the duplicity of Britain, which had encouraged Indigenous resistance to American expansion in the 1790s, but then closed Fort Miami to its Indigenous allies in 1794 in their hour of need.[6] The British were a lesser evil compared to the Americans, given their much slower pace of land appropriation, but they were also clearly seeking to replicate their lost American colony in the lands they still held. Tecumseh joined forces with them in 1812 only to pursue his own goals.

After Tecumseh's death in October 1813 at the Battle of Moraviantown, he quickly became a symbol—of Indigenous warfare and resistance, of the War of 1812, and specifically of Upper Canadian resistance to American invasion. Upper Canadians adopted the Shawnee leader as a war hero who had been centrally important in repelling the initial American invasions and saving the colony from swift annexation. In works of fiction and histories of the war itself, they created a literature that reflected the role they assigned to Tecumseh in their nation-building discourses. The first writings on Tecumseh took the form of long poems, two of which were published in the 1820s. Poets George Longmore and John Richardson, both born and raised in the Canadas, wrote these works as part of their efforts to help found a "national" literature and identity.[7] In the decades that followed, a number of Upper Canadian works on the War of 1812 appeared, also showing an obvious intent to bolster an Upper Canadian identity as well as express a widely felt antagonism toward Americans.[8] In these works, there was invariably a passage on Tecumseh, paying him tribute as a warrior, a saviour of the British colony, and an exceptional example of an Indigenous man—one who stood out in part by contradicting the negative colonial images of Indigenous people that had become so ubiquitous.

The early Canadian literature about Tecumseh displays several characteristic features. One is that the glorification of the Shawnee warrior had distinct patterns and limitations. Though he was depicted as a great fighter and a wise and powerful leader, the notion of savagery frequently overrode other aspects of the narrative. When Tecumseh himself was not being portrayed as "savage," he was being praised for avoiding or preventing "savage" behaviours such as torture, execution of war prisoners, or alcohol use. Moreover, whether Tecumseh himself was honoured or disparaged, these works tended to offer largely negative portrayals of Britain's other Indigenous allies. Longmore and Richardson, authors of the two poems of the 1820s, ostensibly intended to honour Tecumseh, but each also undermined the laudatory message. Both works made it clear in different ways that an Indigenous man could not be equal to a British man. A mid-century chronicler of the War of 1812, Gilbert Auchinleck, had only positive words for Tecumseh himself, but left no doubt that other Indigenous people were fatally flawed. Poet John Richardson also wrote novels and a well-known chronicle of the War of 1812, and in these works he often depicted Indigenous people as cruel, warlike, and given to violation of European military protocols.[9]

The two long poems that initiated Canadian tributes to Tecumseh betrayed a deep ambivalence about their subject. While George Longmore and John Richardson displayed admiration for Tecumseh in many ways and to some extent glorified his image, they also condemned his fellow Indigenous warriors and, more broadly, the culture from which he stemmed. For George Longmore, a veteran of the continental Napoleonic wars who was born and raised in Lower Canada, Tecumseh was a noble warrior, handsome, proud, free, and brave. In his 1824 poem "Tecumthé. A Poetical Tale in Three Cantos," Longmore credits his subject with having "shewn an intellect endued / With more than common powers of mind" and lauds him as "**Tecumthe**, foremost 'midst the brave / Who scorn the hand which would enslave".[10] Longmore's Tecumseh is graced with reason and the instinct for freedom, while the Shawnee society that nurtured him is represented as offering the virtues of simplicity, healthfulness, freedom, and spontaneity. Clearly, in many ways this portrayal accorded with the Noble Savage image. Yet Longmore did not fully embrace the primitivist approach, which has typically judged Indigenous cultures superior in key ways to western ones.[11] Instead, in the end he found Tecumseh wanting because he had no western schooling. Despite some impressive qualities, the Shawnee leader was still "the savage of the woods," and an "untutored soul,"[12] and thus forever set apart from the educated, cultivated British. Thus, as literary scholar Leslie Monkman points out, "in a poem ostensibly honouring Tecumseh, he is ultimately denied his place in 'the immortal page of Fame' because of his lack of what the white man calls education".[13]

John Richardson, a veteran of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada, where he was born and raised, was in some ways even more admiring of the man he honoured with his long poem *Tecumseh, or the Warrior of the West*.[14] He declared that his work was written to "rescue the name of a hero from oblivion" and "preserve the memory of one of the noblest and most gallant spirits that ever tenanted the breast of man".[15] Richardson's Tecumseh was a "towering warrior" of "godlike form", a "monument of strength" with a "mighty arm".[16] The poet presented his subject as wise and prudent in his counsels, brave in battle, merciful in protecting American war prisoners from execution by Indigenous warriors. Yet this is only, in effect, half of Richardson's characterization of the Shawnee leader. Much of his text is devoted to showing Tecumseh as a ferocious and insatiable killer, driven by "the hot fires of hatred"[17] and a lust for revenge. He portrays him "rag[ing] through the deep phalanx / Of deadliest enemies soon bath'd in blood, / Whose quivering scalps, half-crimson'd in their gore, / The reeking warrior from the spoilers bore".[18] Tecumseh is determined to avenge the wounds of his people "With the deep groans of those he pledg'd to chase / Like the fierce monsters of his native wood, / Till gorg'd with victims and with human blood".[19] Richardson ends his poem with Tecumseh's death in the Battle of Moraviantown and the desecration inflicted on his body by American soldiers. The warrior falls with "Rage in his heart, and vengeance in his glance,"[20] while the Americans are excoriated as "wild hell-fiends" for their dishonourable treatment of his remains. It is an ugly final picture, and hardly one that leaves the impression of the "noble and gallant spirit" Richardson sought to preserve in memory.

In his 1855 chronicle of the War of 1812, Gilbert Auchinleck praised Tecumseh's physical strength and agility, his eloquence and "lofty spirit," his ability to control his followers in the field and to "prescribe in the council".[21] He noted with approval Tecumseh's plain attire, so different from the "gaudy decoration" favoured by "other savages," and highlighted his rejection of alcohol, while damning Indigenous people as a group for their alleged alcoholism.[22] Much of the rest of Auchinleck's passage on Tecumseh's character was devoted to condemning the Americans for their treatment of both Tecumseh's memory and Indigenous people in general. He set about showing that, despite the Americans' claim that Tecumseh "neither gave nor accepted quarter," the Americans themselves had a much poorer record in this regard and in some cases actually boasted about the fact that they gave no quarter to Indians. Similarly, Auchinleck highlighted the mangling of Tecumseh's body by Kentuckians and offered a critical reading of published American attempts to justify this behaviour.[23]

Ultimately, these early works were designed to use Tecumseh and the War of 1812 as vehicles and symbols to promote national identity in Upper Canada. They were written in an era when the notion of "savagery" dominated the western view of Indigenous cultures, and when Americans and British were still trading accusations over the war and both parties' treatment of Indigenous peoples. Britain's use of Indigenous allies in the War of 1812 had been the object of American attacks, as in previous conflicts. British and Upper Canadian writers countered with a critique of US aggression against both British territories and Indigenous peoples. Narratives about Tecumseh offered opportunities to criticize this aggression and the plight of the dispossessed, who had, in Richardson's words, "scarce a land to weep— / Scarce room where now their mighty dead may sleep".[24] Longmore also referenced the relentlessness of Indigenous territorial loss, describing Tecumseh as "Driven from the shore, which was his home" by "Rapine with voracious hand".[25]

In short, early Upper Canadian writing about Tecumseh was designed to co-opt this influential Indigenous leader, re-making him as a symbol of Upper Canadian resistance to the United States and its empire-building. Though the tone and details of subsequent portrayals shifted with changing views of colonization and Indigenous people, Canada has not abandoned its grasp on Tecumseh as a symbolic figure. He has been thoroughly incorporated by now into the pantheon of Canadian heroes as an integral part of Canada's nation-building discourse. His legacy, in other words, has been appropriated in the service of the colonization process that he spent his life trying to stop. This approach can only be seen as a tragically ironic distortion of the Shawnee warrior's legacy. Tecumseh dedicated his life to halting the colonization of Indigenous lands and preserving his people's sovereignty and way of life. While his primary target was the advancing United States, there is no doubt that he would also have been ardently opposed to the expansion of settlement in British North America that followed the War of 1812.

Strikingly, the current testimonies to his war heroism overlook the fact that his cooperation with the British got him nowhere. He lost not only his life, but also his entire resistance campaign. Most university-level Canadian history books now acknowledge that the greatest losers in the War of 1812, as in the War of the American Revolution, were not the nation states, but Indigenous nations. Not only did these peoples lose their most inspiring and capable leader at the time, Tecumseh himself, but his confederacy was destroyed and its constituent nations overrun by the United States. The armistice signed between Great Britain and the United States restored pre-war boundaries and left the US free to continue its growth at the expense

of the Indigenous nations to its west and south. In Upper Canada, meanwhile, the advent of peace helped spark a massive influx of British immigrants whose arrival led to the dispossession—largely, but not entirely, by treaty—of most of Britain's Indigenous allies in the War of 1812.[26]

Far from being a patriot for Canada, Tecumseh was opposed to the basis of the colony's existence, which was to claim Indigenous territories for the British Empire and fill them with British settlers. Safely in his grave, he became available 199 years ago for the discursive purposes of a literate culture eager to justify, unify, and identify itself. He has been associated with Canada ever since—in the minds of Canadians, at least—even though he had no real connection with the place, apart from a few visits to Fort Malden, short stays during the war, and his death on Upper Canadian soil. It is perilously easy to misuse the memory of Tecumseh, to use his iconic image in the service of aims contrary to his own. He died fighting the world view and geopolitical practices that dominated Upper Canada at the time and have shaped Canada ever since. He was a key figure in a movement of resistance to colonization that stretches unbroken from the seventeenth century to the present. Though his inclusion in discussions of the War of 1812 is appropriate and important, surely he also deserves more acknowledgment of the anti-colonial motivations that led him to lay down his life for Indigenous sovereignty. In commemorating the war two hundred years later, both Canada and the United States are engaging in a nation-building exercise that celebrates their completion of the vast colonial project of seizing North America. Then, as now, that project was pursued at the expense of Tecumseh and all the peoples of his country, the Turtle Island that predates Canada by thousands of years.

NOTES

[1] According to Tecumseh biographer John Sugden, the Shawnee and other Indigenous nations have oral traditions about Tecumseh, which I have not researched at this point. In the nineteenth century one book was published by an Indigenous researcher with some content relating to Tecumseh, namely the book written by Wyandot Chief Peter Dooyentate Clarke, *Origin and Traditional History of the Wyandotts: and sketches of other Indian Tribes of North America, true traditional stories of Tecumseh and his league in the years 1811 and 1812* (Toronto, 1870).

[2] John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997): ix; 393-5.

[3] Governor William Harrison to the War Dept, Aug 6, 1811, in Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Tecumseh: Fact and Fiction in Early Records* (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1978): 89.

[4] Isaac Brock to Earl of Liverpool, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, York, Aug. 29, 1812, in Carl Klinck, *Tecumseh: Fact and Fiction in Early Records* (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1978): 141, reprinted from E.A. Cruikshank, ed., *Documents Relating to the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit, 1812* (Publications of the Canadian Archives—Nº 7, Ottawa, 1912): 192-193.

[5] See, for example, the biography by Herbert Goltz on "The War of 1812 Website," at http://www.warof1812.ca/tecumseh.htm; another website entitled "War of 1812," found at http://www.eighteentwelve.ca/?q=eng/Topic/6; "1812 Ontario," at http://www.1812ontario.ca/history/important-people/tecumseh/. Though the Canadian federal government website, "The War of 1812," emphasizes Tecumseh's military victories and positive relationship with Brock, it too acknowledges his primary opposition to the US: see http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1340029669001 and http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1317828221939/1317828660198#a4.

[6] Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 88-90, 310, 328. In 1794, Tecumseh was among the retreating warriors who were denied entrance to Britain's Fort Miami after their defeat by US forces in the Battle of Fallen Timbers. He was also aware of Britain's failure to protect Indigenous interests after the American Revolution, despite their many promises during the conflict.

[7] George Longmore, "Tecumthé. A Poetical Tale in Three Cantos," Montreal: *Canadian Review and Literary and Historical Journal* (December 1824); John Richardson, *Tecumseh, or the Warrior of the West*. A poem in four cantos (London: R. Glynn, 1828).

[8] Examples include John Richardson's *War of 1812* (republished as Alexander Casselman, ed., *Richardson's War of 1812.* Toronto: Historical Publishing Co., 1902); G. [Gilbert] Auchinleck, *A History of the War between Great Britain and the United States of America During the Years 1812, 1813 & 1814* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1972; orig. Toronto 1855); William Coffin, *1812: The War, and Its Moral*. Montreal: John Lovell, 1864.

[9] Richardson's publications on the War of 1812 include *A Canadian Campaign*, published serially in the *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* (London: Colburn) in 1826-7, and *War of 1812, first series; containing a full and detailed narrative of the operations of the right division, of the Canadian army* ([Brockville], 1842) He also wrote the novels *Wacousta, Hardscrabble*, and *Wau-nan-gee*, all with significant content relating to Indigenous warfare.

[10] George Longmore, "Tecumthé. A Poetical Tale in Three Cantos," Montreal: *Canadian Review and Literary and Historical Journal* (December 1824), Canto III, lines 147-8: 161.

[11] Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981): 5.

[12] Longmore, "Tecumthé," Canto I, lines 145-198.

[13] Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981): 105.

[14] John Richardson, *Tecumseh, or the Warrior of the West*. A poem in four cantos (London: R. Glynn, 1828).

[15] John Richardson, *Tecumseh, or the Warrior of the West*. A poem in four cantos (London: R. Glynn, 1828), Preface, p. V.

[16] Richardson, *Tecumseh*, Canto I, Stanzas XXVII and XXIX.

[17] Richardson, *Tecumseh*, Canto I, Stanza XL.

[18] Richardson, *Tecumseh*, Canto I, Stanza XXIX.

[19] Richardson, *Tecumseh*, Canto I, Stanza XXXVI.

[20] Richardson, *Tecumseh*, Canto 4, Stanza LI.

[21] G. [Gilbert] Auchinleck, *A History of the War between Great Britain and the United States of America During the Years 1812, 1813 & 1814* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1972; orig. Toronto 1855): 229.

[22] Ibid.: 229-230.

[23] Auchinleck, *History of the War*: 230-231.

[24] Richardson, *Tecumseh*, Canto 2, stanza XX.

[25] Longmore, "Tecumthé," Canto 3, lines 149-150.

[26] For an account of the significant role of squatting and illegal land seizure in the dispossession of southern Ontario First Nations, see Sidney Harring, *White Man's Law. Native People in Nineteenth-century Canadian Jurisprudence*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.