

# The Co-optation of Tecumseh: The War of 1812 and Racial Discourses in Upper Canada

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Robin Jarvis Brownlie

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## Abstract



The Shawnee leader Tecumseh is one of very few named Aboriginal figures who are accorded a place in Canadian history texts. In the years following the War of 1812, he was claimed by Upper Canadians as a war hero and symbol of the struggle with the United States, a “Noble Savage” whose life and death provided material for nation-building discourses. Through the analysis of two long poems about Tecumseh published in the 1820s, this essay examines the early stages of Upper Canada’s co-optation of Tecumseh as a component of its national identity. The valiant but ultimately savage character the poems depicted could inspire Upper Canadians and remind them of their wartime sacrifices, but he also served to mark off Indigenous

people from the Euro-Canadians whose cultural superiority legitimated their possession of the colony's lands and resources. These literary works produced a "Canadian" hero who could be incorporated as a national symbol for a settlement colony he never set out to defend, and whose massive expansion after his death he would have vigorously opposed.

## Résumé

Le chef shawnee Tecumseh est un des rares Amérindiens mentionnés nommément dans les livres d'histoire canadienne. À la suite de la Guerre de 1812, les Haut-Canadiens en firent un héros de guerre et un symbole de la lutte contre les États-Unis. Ils récupérèrent la vie et la mort de ce « noble sauvage » dans leurs efforts pour construire une identité nationale. En analysant deux poèmes concernant Tecumseh publiés dans les années 1820, cet essai étudie les premières manifestations de cette récupération. Son courage et, plus fondamentalement, son caractère sauvage pouvaient inspirer les Haut-Canadiens et leur rappeler leurs sacrifices durant la guerre. Ils servaient aussi à séparer les peuples autochtones des Euro-Canadiens dont la supériorité culturelle légitimait leur possession du territoire et des ressources de la colonie. Ces oeuvres littéraires ont ainsi créé un héros « canadien » qui pouvait servir de symbole national dans une colonie qu'il n'a jamais voulu défendre et qu'il aurait combattu s'il avait survécu.

## Biographical note

ROBIN JARVIS BROWNLIE teaches in the Department of History at the University of Manitoba and is the author of *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2003). His most recent book is an essay collection co-edited with Dr. Valerie Korinek, *Finding a Way to the Heart: Feminist Writings on Aboriginal and Women's History in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

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ROBIN JARVIS BROWNLIE enseigne au département d'histoire de la University of Manitoba. Parmi ses plus publications, on compte *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2003) ainsi qu'une collection d'essais co-dirigée avec Valerie Korinek et intitulée *Finding a Way to the Heart: Feminist Writings on Aboriginal and Women's History in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

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