



KING TOWNSHIP  
*Historical*  
SOCIETY

2920 KING ROAD, KING CITY, ONTARIO, L7B 1L6



## Remembrance Day Program

### War of 1812

The British

The Americans

The Natives!

### “Tecumseh Hero or Failure”

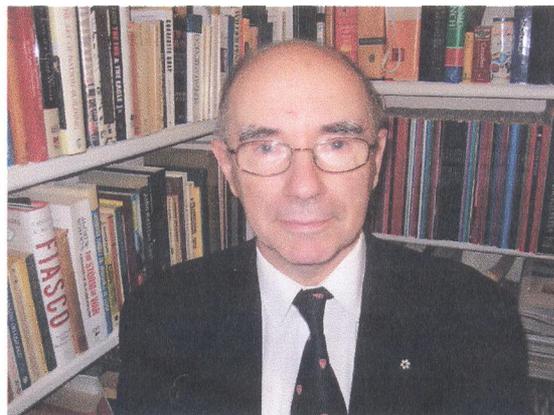


Saturday November 19 at 2:00 PM

Nobleton United Church  
6076 King Road (West of HWY 27)

Presented by Dr. Desmond Morton

*One of Canada's most published military historians*



Text of a speech by Desmond Morton, Professor of History Emeritus at McGill University at Nobleton United Church in King Township on 22 November 2011 to the King Township Historical Society at 1400hrs

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## **WHY TECUMSEH MATTERED IN THE WAR OF 1812**

Having fought my way through the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 2009, with repetitions in Quebec, Montreal, Paris and even in Toronto of my thesis that Wolfe couldn't really claim victory on the Plains of Abraham on 13 September 1759 when his panic-stricken enemy fled to safety, reorganized and returned in April to reverse, completely, the 1759 result. Yes, Britain won Quebec but the issue was settled elsewhere, in two battles, Lagos and Quiberon, of which almost no Canadians have ever heard. By rebuilding the Royal Navy, Pitt the Elder gave himself the means to destroy both French fleets for the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. If there was no French fleet coming up the St. Lawrence in April, 1760, it was game over, even for Lévis's victorious army. As Pitt had planned, the British Navy gave Britain the victory on the other side of the world. That victory, in turn, led to the American Revolution when Whitehall's governor, Sir James Murray, protected the faith and rights of the people of New France against their insatiable enemies next door, and that war led naturally to 1812, and the events our Prime Minister has pledged \$25 million to celebrate. None of that, to my knowledge, is being spent this afternoon.

If the War of 1812 is now in our commemorative sights, I hope I can stick closer to orthodoxy than I did on the Plains of Abraham. I had ignored a warning from a perfectly charming guide at Quebec's Citadelle. When I invited him to look at revisionist thoughts offered by our War Museum's pre-Confederation expert, Peter Macleod, he reminded me of his business. He was a Laval University student; the tips he earned being a guide were putting him through school. And tourists are more generous if you keep the story "short and sweet", a phrase he had no need to translate into French.

What I learned about the War of 1812 came largely from my heroic mentor in military history, J. Mackay Hitsman and his *Incredible War of 1812*. Mac, as you may know, was almost completely paralyzed when I met him in the old Army Historical Section, but no one in the Section was more productive or focussed. Whenever a task has seemed utterly impossible to

me, a brief memory of what Hitsman could get done sets me to work again. Yet the very first thing I do is to argue with his very first sentence: “The War of 1812 was a result of long standing disputes and, like many wars before or since, failed to resolve them.” I think this phrase applies perfectly to the wars of our own and our parents’ lifetimes. Was anything settled by the 1914-18 War, beyond the future careers of two of the most evil human beings in modern history, Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Was anything resolved by two wars in Iraq, beyond the acceleration of Iran to the status of a real nuclear power? And I could go on, perhaps leaving you with a question for the next history essay you may have to assign. “Did the War of 1812 leave any of its causes to live on for future wars? One answer is Yes: Americans would have to share their end of North America with Canadians. On the other hand, Americans, like Canadians, told their children they had won the war. Why would you fight a war you had so obviously won. As a prudent Canadian, contain your wrath if an American tells you who won this war. Agree and change the subject. What he/she doesn’t know will save us all!

Even before war was declared, the British had abandoned the Orders in Council which constrained American shipping, and the British had virtually grovelled for firing on the USS *Chesapeake* in 1807, and sent the offending admiral home in disgrace. The real issue in 1812 was alleged British support for today’s hero, Tecumseh, and his struggle to preserve the lands of his people. Without such allies, Upper Canada could not be defended by a few hundred British redcoats and a militia permeated by American settlers and unsure which way it would shoot. Yet Whitehall pleaded with its Indian agents to discourage their Indians from fighting American expansion and refused to help them when, at the gates of Fort Miami, their appeals for ammunition to defend themselves from annihilation fell on deaf ears. They would soon be betrayed again. As in the peace that ended the Revolutionary War in Paris in September, 1783, First Nations were shut out and ignored in negotiating the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. Lacking any understanding from Americans or even the slightest sympathy from British policy-makers for saving British Canada, Native people dropped out of history and into poverty and irrelevance after the War of 1812. Today, their vital contributions to the survival of Upper Canada barely stir even a folkloric memory.

Has there ever been a war that gave more satisfaction to its participants? As the textbooks adopted by American states and Canadian

provinces agree with a rare and stirring unanimity, both sides won. Both sides enriched their national mythology, Americans sing a poem from 1814 as their national anthem and recognize the whitewash on their fire-damaged presidential residence, Canadians salute a national saviour in Isaac Brock and, if belatedly, his valiant Shawnee ally, Tecumseh. We have also tucked away some cautionary lessons. Americans got over the assumption that victories were “merely a matter of marching”. That thought forced them to swallow some of the most humiliating defeats of their military history in 1812. Canadians and their British allies lost battles too, and by 1814, the Americans had mastered some of the professionalism of British regulars in battles like Lundy’s Lane. At Plattsburgh, later that year. Wellington’s Peninsular war veterans had a painful and shaming reminder that war in North America was no picnic. If British negotiators ignored their Native allies, they had good reason to seek a peace at Ghent. So did representatives of a bankrupt and divided United States

So why was there a war? Why, having administered one of the worst British defeats since Jeanne d’Arc, did the Americans do so badly? Why, by 1814, had they done well enough to secure the *status quo ante* that really explained why there would be no more wars? The simplest answer, Alan Taylor, our newest 1812 historian suggests, was the Revolutionary war itself. Americans do not have a modest opinion of themselves but at Paris in 1783 they secured one of the most one-sided victories in history. Yes, they promised to restore property and civil rights of those who had lost them by respecting their allegiance to the British Crown. And, Yes , they agreed to make room for the hunting grounds of the western Indians,. Otherwise they had won independence, international recognition and virtually all they had sought from their former suzerain. And, of course, they did not even do what they had promised. The Articles of Confederation left the central government which had, negotiated the treaty, either the authority to coerce states to recognize Loyalist claims, or the funds to provide compensation. Even by 1784, it was apparent by 1784 that any such burden would fall on British taxpayers because one lesson of the Revolution was that the costs of Empire must never again fall on colonials. As the modern Tea Party movement would argue, if Americans have a crucial freedom, it is from being taxed.

For a time, of course, British officials in what remained of British North America looked to their Indian allies during the conflict. They were in no hurry to abandon their old hunting grounds in what we now call Ohio and

Michigan, and the British had been loath to explain those sections of the Treaty of Paris to them. A similar betrayal by the French in 1763 had led to Pontiac's rising and memorable massacres, Governor Frederick Haldimand had suggested, and Whitehall had agreed, Natives could stay put as a British pressure tactic. To encourage them, the British also ignored treaty terms and held on to their forts at Oswegatchie, Oswego, Niagara, Presqu'ile, Sandusky, Detroit and Michilimackinac. Indians could travel each spring to collect British food, ammunition and other presents, and to trade their furs with merchants from the Montreal-based North-West Company.

Americans saw a dirty trick. The westward drive of American settlement had been bottled up by the French in the 1750s; now the British were playing the same game. Without formal statehood, the western American voice was still muted in Congress but its rage and frustration, fuelled by an exaggerated terror of merciless Indian attacks, produced the War Hawk coalition of Republicans that voted for war in 1812.

The U.S. could seek older, better-established allies. In 1793, the French Revolution boiled into what Robert Harvey has called the War of Wars – a virtually uninterrupted twenty-two years of war between revolutionary France and the rest of Europe. It was not the first worldwide war nor the last, but it was easily the longest and the most all-encompassing. For much of it, only the English Channel barred French armies from invading and overwhelming Great Britain as they eventually defeated every other Old World monarchy from Madrid to Moscow.

How could England be brought to heel? The answer was to punish a trading nation by slamming its major markets shut. Whatever the French could control, they closed. It was a game the British could play, with the added advantage of a Royal Navy that could enforce British policy on every ocean of the world. Whitehall formulated its directives as "Orders in Council", commanding all merchant ships to submit to British inspection and, if they contained contraband, to seizure and sale as prizes, to the profit of the naval officer who did the seizing, and even to their crews. International law did not yet define the rights of neutrals or of belligerents. In its absence, force was law.

Britain could survive because, as William Pitt, Lord Chatham had recognized, its army might seem contemptible, but its fleet gave it command of the oceans and access to the rest of the world. The French, the

Spanish, even the Russians and Turks had warships but the British had the best fleet and, because it was always at sea, it generally ruled the waves. After their disastrous defeat at Trafalgar, French and Spanish naval power was largely limited to small, fast privateers. For years, a major French army camped at Boulogne, waiting to invade England. Not even Napoleon dared take the risk. Instead, he marched his Grande Armée to its destruction by General Winter in Russia in 1812. Two years later, his strength had been destroyed and Napoleon was an exile on the Isle of Elba. By no coincidence, the War of 1812 in North America ended in that year too.

The war in Europe drained Britain's Exchequer and scattered her soldiers around the world, not least in its remaining North American territory. Congress deplored standing armies but in 1790 and 1791 tiny forces of state militia and volunteers were massacred in Ohio by western Indians. Congress approved a small army called an American Legion, with infantry, cavalry and light artillery, commanded by Major-General "Mad Anthony" Wayne, Disciplined and aggressively led, the Americans met an Indian force outside a British fort built at the rapids of the Miami River. In the battle of the Fallen Timbers, the Americans shattered their Indian opponents. As I have mentioned earlier, fugitives found the gates of the British fort stubbornly locked. Americans slaughtered their enemy as ruthlessly as the Indians had slaughtered Americans two years before, and would again at Chicago.

Urged by Joseph Brant to heed the altered power balance, the western Indians accepted defeat in the Peace of Greenville on August 3rd, 1795. The British garrison's Indian Department still offered Natives gifts and promises, to keep the Natives as allies but Greenville delivered most of the Ohio country to white settlement and persuaded most Natives to accept the United States as their exclusive protector. Among those who resisted was a Shawnee war chief, Tecumseh, who proposed to mobilize a great Native confederacy to save their Native lands. His brother, a religious mystic named Tenskwatata or The Prophet, added a mystic voice to the cause, claiming that Americans were only wicked and cruel because God had poisoned them with pestilence from the Great Waters they had crossed, and that the land they seized would eventually put them to death. Killing them was both cruel and unnecessary. You will appreciate that the doctrine was perhaps confusing and insipid to a warrior like Tecumseh though he, himself, firmly opposed the Shawnee tradition of killing prisoners

If war and negotiation brought peace to the American North West, how about seeking further agreement with the old enemy, Great Britain. Thomas Jefferson, now the first Republican president, sent John Jay, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, to London to seek peace. Jay's treaty, signed in London on November 19, 1794, confirmed British surrender of the western forts and enough relaxation of the restrictive Navigation Laws to allow American ships a limited trade with the East and West Indies. While some issues, such as Royal Navy interference with American ships on the high seas, were shelved for a couple of years, Surely the war with France would be over by 1796. With Greenville and Jay's Treaty, fear of imminent Anglo-American war in North America subsided, and Britain trimmed its garrison accordingly.

Jay's Treaty enraged Napoleon, and French power was exercised to prey on American shipping. Jefferson struck back, declaring war on France in 1798 and creating a first tiny U.S. Navy in April, 1798. The undeclared naval war with France ended in 1801, when American warships and Marines were re-directed against the Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean.

Napoleon's imperial ambitions were by no means been assuaged. A European peace treaty at Amiens in 1802, lasted barely a year. As French armies again rolled irresistibly across Europe, British Orders in council again barred neutral ships from unloading in European harbours. Napoleon's Berlin decrees of November 21, 1806 confiscated any British goods entering European ports he could control, regardless of the origins of the ship. When a British order-in-council directed that any ship that failed to submit to inspection in a British port would automatically be considered an enemy vessel. Napoleon's Milan Decrees proclaimed that a British inspection would rob any ship of its neutral character.

Whether British or French, American merchant shipping could not claim freedom of the seas from either belligerent, but ship owners had no difficulty in recognizing that the Royal Navy was far more effective than an occasional French frigate or privateer. Moreover, the Royal Navy contributed its own grievance to American feelings. Maintaining the world's largest fleet took manpower. Press gangs seized and conscripted anyone with seafaring potential. British seamen endured foul shipboard conditions and brutal discipline. A recaptured deserter could suffer death by merciless flogging. British naval captains soon realized that intercepting American merchant ships gave them a chance to look over the crew for likely prospects

and to reclaim alleged deserters. As many as 5,000 Americans may have been kidnapped to serve as British seamen.

In 1807, a British squadron lay off Chesapeake Bay, waiting for some French ships to emerge. Suddenly five seamen seized a small boat and sailed it ashore. Soon the men were cavorting in Norfolk, Virginia. American authorities bluntly refused to return them to British jurisdiction. The British commander at Halifax, Sir George Berkeley demanded vengeance. When the 38gun US frigate *Chesapeake* emerged from Norfolk, a British 50-gun ship, HMS *Leopard* challenged her. The British ship opened fire, killed three U.S. seamen and wounded 18 more. When the *Chesapeake* surrendered, a British party boarded the ship and left with four alleged deserters as prisoners.

A predictable explosion of rage tore across the United States. North of the border, British officials did what they could to prepare for war and discovered, to their dismay, that after years of neglect, there was almost nothing they could do. A year passed before Lower Canada's elderly civilian administrator even called out militia. There were neither officers to train the men nor muskets to arm them. In Upper Canada, Governor Francis Gore refused even to call out the militia, preferring to hide their wretched state. In Whitehall, British authorities rapidly pulled in their horns. They had never authorized searches of neutral warships. Berkeley was recalled. Compensation was offered to the wounded and to next-of-kin of the dead, Even the four captives were returned. Once again, a crisis had passed, but a memory had been left behind. North of the border, the utter unreadiness of both Upper and Lower Canada began to be repaired. British officers began to reflect on what they would have to do next time a war scare exploded.

Could they even defend Upper Canada, the western province created by Whitehall in 1791? Lt. Gen Sir James Craig, who had arrived as Captain General and Lieutenant Governor of Lower Canada, made it clear that his orders were to defend Quebec at all costs.. Colonel Isaac Brock, appointed to protect Upper Canada, accepted the principle that kept British regular troops together and under discipline rather than deserting over a nearby American border. Craig, who despised Lower Canadian French, would willingly share his Lower Canadian Militia with the English-speaking western province to harry any American column heading north and east to Quebec, designated, as ever, as Britain's ultimate stronghold.

The outcome of the War in 1812, owed much to the *Chesapeake* crisis for forcing British commanders to think out their options and organize their forces to execute them. The affair did nothing to open Atlantic navigation to American shipping and it heightened efforts to revive the western Indian alliance as a source of strength to the British and of fear to the Americans. That fear, linked to rising political influence of the frontier states in Congress created the War Hawk movement led by Clay of Tennessee and other politicians disillusioned with the post-Revolutionary governing elites. Jefferson's response to continued interference with freedom of the seas had been hurried through Congress as the Embargo Act. If neutral shipping was to be banned, the United States would respond with an embargo of any port that would ban its ships. Drop the ban and the embargo would be lifted, even for England and France. This draconian legislation promoted an uproar of protests, particularly when it interfered with existing and lucrative trade with Canadian destinations. If western states wanted war, the mercantile leaders of New England, New York and New Jersey protested furiously. They would be ruined, and the Non-Intercourse, pushed through by a newly-elected President James Madison on March 1, 1809, was hardly an improvement.

The forces of world trade and western settlement were in conflict over their government's policies on what to do about the British, the French and trade. In some ways, the French took themselves out of the competition by selling their Louisiana Territory to the United States. While some in British Canada suspected a cunning trick to make Napoleonic allies of the Americans, the general U.S. response was that the French had pulled up any stake they held in North America and handed power to Americans. Cleaning the British out of their end of North America was only a logical completion of what a later generation would call "Manifest Destiny". The Embargo issue left a profound split over making war with Britain. The Act and its successors helped ensure a vital flow of food over the border when war came. Without it, British soldiers and colonists might have starved to death.

Jefferson's Republicans reflected a more populist and radical political stream than the Federalist alternative. His presidency was followed by James Madison, a gentler, more thoughtful politician, and by Republican majorities in both houses of Congress. Much of that voice came from the West and the South, and a faction, dubbed by Federalists the "War-Hawks", emerged from those regions with the conquest of British North America as their front-of-mind issue. Leaders included Henry Clay, a brash Kentucky lawyer, and

John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, an eloquent and unbending spokesman for the Old South. Congress approved a new Embargo Bill in early 1812 and, trusting that it would persuade the British to cancel their Orders in Council, Madison signed the Bill into law on April 4, 1812. War Hawks insisted that any Embargo would last only until war was declared. Sharing Madison's apprehensions about war, the British government in fact did as the American president wished, cancelled their restraint on neutral trade as applied to the United States, and waited for a response.

It did not come. Communications were undependable on the wintry Atlantic and the news seems to have come too late. Congress had been busy expanding the United States army, though not the Navy. Some of its reforms were silly – Allowing men to enlist for a twelve-month term proved more hindrance than help when the war began, and a stern reluctance to tax American voters soon reduced Madison's government to finance its war efforts by costly and humiliating dodges, but the end was achieved. On 18 June, after Congress had divided bitterly on the issue, the Declaration of War became law.

This time, nothing much happened on the American side. General Prévost, who had replaced the aging Craig, even promoted a truce with his aged U.S. counterparts along the border so that cooler heads in Washington might have second thoughts. Instead, Washington's venerable Revolutionary War generals, Dearborn, Van Rensselaer and Hull tried to figure out what to do next.

In Upper Canada, Brock had formulated his plan. Despairing of disloyal militia and undependable Native allies was not part of his character. Long before the concept or parameters of psychological warfare emerged, Brock was a practitioner. The defence of Upper Canada depended on lettering his militia and Natives who was going to win. For all the please from Prevost in Quebec, Brock ordered his tiny garrison in the region to seize the American army post at Michilimackinac. It was done. Next, he moved all the militia he could gather to the far end of Lake Erie at Amherstburg. There he met Tecumseh. The Shawnee chief had never favoured the British alliance but he had suffered defeats at American hands. And he knew that his Confederacy depended on British victories. Brock understood the weakness of any Native chief's leadership. In Native tradition, warriors chose for themselves to fight or to flee. They followed Tecumseh because they trusted his judgement but they could desert him if

they so chose. Brock knew what to do. When the two men met, he greeted Tecumseh like an older brother. “This”, he announced, “is a man!”

Brock’s next target was Fort Detroit. His arrival in western Upper Canada had sent an American invasion scurrying for safety. The American commander, General William Hull, was an old Revolutionary War hero, further crippled because his daughter and her children had joined him. What would be their fate in the hands of the Indians. Brock wondered too, but he played the card. Tecumseh led his warriors across the river, and infiltrated them around the American fort. Brock followed with his regulars, militia and artillery, massing under the walls but a safe distance from the fort. Next, a message to Hull reminded him that his British foe might not be able to restrain the Natives if a battle occurred. Beset by subordinates and his own fears, it was warning enough for Hull. A message of complete capitulation followed almost at once. The entire garrison passed into British hands, together with their weapons, supplies and a badly-needed treasury of funds. Brock had his second victory. As American prisoners passed down the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence to Quebec, no one need doubt who was winning the War of 1812.

The war, of course, would continue. Brock moved to the Niagara Frontier where New York state militia had refused to cross with American troops, protesting that their role was limited to protecting their homeland. Brock rode south from Fort George to crush the invaders, ran into their lines and was shot dead. It was a tragic loss and left his critics to complain that Britain’s best and bravest general had foolishly sacrificed himself. There would be no successor to match him though the real victor of Queenston heights was his unloved deputy, General Roger Sheaffe, who more cautiously drove the Americans back to the Niagara River where the survivors surrendered.

To command in the West, the British could only promote one of Brock’s subordinates, Colonel Henry Procter. Though he tried to imitate Brock, his position became hopeless when an American naval squadron, newly-built, defeated the tiny British fleet on Lake Erie. Now Procter’s line of communications was gone. How could he feed his troops or militia or supply his Native allies. Over Tecumseh’s furious opposition, he decided to retreat to the Niagara Peninsula. Tecumseh reluctantly accompanied him, hoping to punish the pursuing Americans at some stage along the route. That moment came near Moraviantown, a Christian Native village on the Thames

on 5 October. The exhausted British force had to stop and rest. The pursuing Americans, mounted fighters from Tennessee and Kentucky commanded by General and future president William Henry Harrison, had none of the terror of Native warriors that afflicted American militia and charged down on the British and Natives. Procter, encumbered by his wife and family, fled for safety. His soldiers broke and fled, leaving Tecumseh and his Natives to fight and die. No one ever found the Native leaders' body and everyone from Harrison to his last-joined corporal claimed to have killed him. Two monuments were erected to his memory but his bones were never found.

He had trusted in Brock and felt deceived in his last days by Procter and the British. Some Native historians have portrayed Tecumseh as a traitor to his own cause when he chose to ally himself with the British. As with most political judgements, it is fair to ask what realistic choices he possessed. Twice in his life before the War, he had negotiated with Harrison but to no remotely satisfactory end. In Brock, he had encountered a man who may be our greatest and most unchallenged warrior hero. Tecumseh's tragedy was that there were not two such men in 1812 and not even one of them by 1813.

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Montreal, 28 October 2011.

Words 3,262.

Desmond Morton is Hiram Mills professor of history at McGill University, founding director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and author of *A Military History of Canada* and *Une Histoire militaire du Canada*.