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## Chief Tecumseh – “The Wellington of the Indians”



Sir Isaac Brock is often remembered as “the saviour of Canada” for his role in the War of 1812 (1812-14), but another man should rightly share that honour – the Native leader called Tecumseh. His name has been translated several ways, and relates to the legend that a comet passed over the Shawnee village of Old Piqua – on the Mad River near modern Springfield, Ohio – on the night Tecumseh was born in March 1768. Tecumseh was reportedly the fifth of nine children born to Shawnee warrior Puckeshinewa and his wife, a Creek woman called Methoataske.

Puckeshinewa was killed during the Battle of Point Pleasant in 1774. Five years later about 1,000 Shawnee abandoned the Ohio Valley after a raid by Kentuckians. Among the refugees was Methoataske; Tecumseh remained in Ohio living with an older sister. The greatest influence on the youth came from his eldest brother, Chiksika, who acted as a surrogate parent to his younger siblings. Chiksika had no love for the people who killed his father, and felt that peace could only be made once the Whites were chased from the Ohio region. Tecumseh adopted his brother’s outlook even before Chiksika died attacking an American outpost in 1788. The troubles of Tecumseh’s family mirrored that of their people.

According to John Sugden, the name Shawnee means “southerners,” and this Algonquian people may have originated in the Carolinas. In the late-1600s they were living in the Ohio and Cumberland Valleys, but were dislodged by raids from the Iroquois Confederacy. By 1730 one group of Shawnee had settled in modern Pennsylvania. Attacks by the Iroquois (along with the English) continued, however, and the Pennsylvania Shawnee moved west to their old Ohio homelands. Safe from their old tribal enemies, the Shawnee were still not secure against the spread of White settlement. The struggle to find a safe haven, and defend against American incursions was a hallmark of the Shawnee’s existence at the turn of the nineteenth century; the same was true for Tecumseh himself.

Tecumseh wed at least twice, but by 1807 had renounced married life. Tall for his people, Tecumseh stood at around five foot ten. He was noted for his handsome features, and most people who met Tecumseh were impressed by his grace and dignity of bearing. His only real physical flaw was a limp,

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caused by a leg injury suffered when he fell from a horse as a youth. Today we can only guess exactly what Tecumseh looked like, as he never agreed to have a White artist paint his portrait. The full extent of his powerful oratory skills are also lost. When speaking, and through his physical presence, Tecumseh could move an audience to rage, sorrow or joy. Though parts of his speeches have survived, these are filtered through interpreters, and even at the best of times we cannot experience the full impact Tecumseh had on his audiences.

Speaking ability was prized among many First Nations peoples, and so was courage – Tecumseh was known as much for bravery in battle as for his oratory. During the American Revolution (1775-83) the teenage Tecumseh fought alongside Chiksika, and afterwards the brothers participated in raids on settlements south of the Ohio River. It was during this period that Tecumseh witnessed the burning of an American captive. From that point on Tecumseh decided he would never again be party to torturing prisoners.

His views on torture did not mean Tecumseh shied away from a fight. He was part of the action in 1794 when a large force of Shawnee, and allied tribes, battled 3,500 Americans sent to pacify the Shawnee as a threat to Kentucky settlers. Led by major general “Mad” Anthony Wayne (1745-96), the Americans routed the Natives near the Miami River in the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Most of the defeated chiefs signed the Treaty of Greenville (1795), giving up title to vast tracts of land. Tecumseh was now a minor chief himself, but refused to sign. Following the Greenville Treaty, Tecumseh and a number of like-minded followers moved several times.

A new phase in Tecumseh’s life began in 1805 when his younger brother experienced a religious revelation, becoming Tenskwatawa, “The Open Door.” Also called the Prophet, Tenskwatawa preached that the Americans were evil, and that Native peoples must break their reliance on White goods like firearms and alcohol, and have minimal contact with the invaders.

The ideals Tenskwatawa preached suited Tecumseh’s goals for his people. Tecumseh revived the ideas of the Ottawa war chief Pontiac (c. 1720-69), who worked toward a Native confederacy against their European enemies. Tecumseh travelled vast distances to spread his message, arguing that the only way for the First Nations peoples to survive was to set aside their traditional mistrust and resist their common enemy. One of Tecumseh’s most important ideas was the notion that the land was held in common by all, so no more could be sold to the Whites.

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In 1808 Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa founded a new settlement at the mouth of the Tippecanoe River, near present-day Lafayette, Indiana. Called Prophetstown, the village was populated by families from a number of tribes. Whether brought there by Tenskwatawa's religious revival or Tecumseh's message of Indian confederacy, the settlers of Prophetstown were seen as a threat by some Americans, especially Indiana governor – future US President – William Henry Harrison (1773-1841).

Harrison became Tecumseh's greatest enemy. An officer at Fallen Timbers, he actively promoted settlement in the Northwest, and engineered a number of land deals that removed millions of acres of territory from Indian control. In 1809 Harrison achieved his biggest coup with the Treaty of Fort Wayne, a dubious document that ceded three million acres in central Indiana. Considered by Harrison as recently-arrived "nomads" in the region, neither Tecumseh's followers nor the Shawnee in general were party to the treaty.

Returning from his travels to promote the Native confederacy, Tecumseh had two turbulent meetings with Harrison, rejecting the terms of the Fort Wayne treaty. Harrison felt a grudging admiration for the Shawnee leader, but this did not stop his plans to destroy Tecumseh's Native alliance. When Tecumseh set off southward to meet with the Creeks, Harrison marched with a force including US regular troops to repeat the success of Fallen Timbers.

In 1811 Harrison's army camped near Prophetstown. Though he intended to destroy the settlement, Harrison hoped to make the Natives seem like the aggressors; the Prophet played right into his hands. Under his direction the warriors launched a night attack, assured that they were protected from American bullets. In the end, Harrison narrowly won the 7 November "Battle of Tippecanoe," and the Prophet was discredited in the eyes of many followers. Only a few warriors had died, but the failed promise of invincibility led many to doubt his spiritual influence. With his brother in disgrace, Tecumseh was now the sole leader of their followers. He was enraged at the American destruction of Prophetstown, and vowed revenge. His opportunity came in 1812.

President James Madison (1751-1836) asked Congress to declare war on Great Britain, which they did on 18 June. Holding much of what is now eastern Canada, the British had continued to trade with the Native tribes, and many Americans blamed them for provoking Indian attacks. This was not exactly true, but Harrison's attack on Prophetstown drove Tecumseh and his followers

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wholeheartedly into the British camp. With Britain engaged against Napoleonic France, its resources in Canada were thin. It was estimated that Tecumseh's confederacy could bring 3,000 warriors – Shawnee, Miami, Wyandot, Potomac, Delaware – into the fight. As the war opened, the support of Tecumseh, along with that of other tribes allied to the British, were a crucial factor in saving Canada from American invasion.

Tecumseh was impressed by British major general Isaac Brock's fighting spirit. The admiration was mutual. Brock called Tecumseh "the Wellington of the Indians," perhaps the greatest compliment a British officer of the day could give. Tecumseh and his warriors participated in the battles of Brownstown and Monguagon, and in Brock's bloodless victory at Detroit (For his role at Detroit Tecumseh was granted the honours of a British brigadier general). Tecumseh was not present in October 1812 when Brock was felled during the Battle of Queenston Heights, but soon felt the loss of his great ally.

By Spring 1813 the war was going badly for the Anglo-Canadian forces. In May Brock's successor, brigadier general Henry Proctor (c. 1763-1822), led an unsuccessful attack on Harrison's Fort Meigs. The action's only "British" success was the defeat of some Kentucky militia by Tecumseh's warriors. September found Proctor, now a major general, retreating up the Niagara Peninsula pursued by Harrison, after the Americans had seized control of Lake Erie. Tecumseh had little respect for Proctor, whom he saw as cowardly. He browbeat the general into making a stand against Harrison's forces near Moraviantown, Ontario, by the banks of the River Thames. Fought on 5 October, Moraviantown – also called the Battle of the Thames – was Tecumseh's last stand. Though British forces broke and ran, the Native warriors fought on against overwhelming odds. After a time Tecumseh's voice, which urged his comrades on through the battle, was stilled.

No one is sure who killed Tecumseh, and even the fate of his remains is unknown. No other leader emerged to take Tecumseh's place, and the dream of a great Indian confederacy was never realized. Though Native warriors continued to fight with distinction – on both sides – in the War of 1812, their military services never regained their importance in North American warfare. Still, Tecumseh has achieved a kind of immortality as an example of courage and tenacity to people of all races. His memory is enshrined in the names of several towns, both in his country of birth and the country he helped preserve.

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1. Explain the difficulties facing the Shawnee in finding a homeland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Name two qualities highly valued by First Nations people. Give examples of these qualities held by Tecumseh.
3. Who was the “Prophet” and what did he preach? Where did he and Tecumseh settle?
4. Who was William Henry Harrison? Describe his interactions with Tecumseh.
5. What were the terms of the Treaty of Fort Wayne? Why were the Shawnee excluded from this treaty?
6. How did Harrison’s attack on Prophetstown help the British in Canada?
7. Describe the relationship between Tecumseh and Isaac Brock.
8. Describe the relationship between Tecumseh and Henry Proctor.
9. Why did the dream of an Indian Confederacy fail?
10. How do you think Tecumseh should be remembered?