

## **The War of 1812 as a Movie MacGuffin.**

By John A. Tures

### **Forgotten by History ... and Hollywood?**

The War of 1812 is often labeled a forgotten war. While recent scholarship about the conflict seems to have entered a renaissance that makes the label more dubious, the conflict has made few in-roads into Hollywood. Only a handful of films even deal with the subject, according to an overview on [historyonfilm.com](http://historyonfilm.com).<sup>1</sup> The source claims only five such films were made, all taking place over a 20 year period (between 1938 and 1958).<sup>2</sup> But while there were actually eight such films, extending through 1995, the gist of the argument is correct. The War of 1812 is generally ignored by American films, despite the importance of the conflict for: (1) bequeathing an impressive military victory and several naval successes over a British superpower in both arenas, (2) creating a National Anthem, and contributing to a national identity, (3) checking the American expansion northward, creating the future nation of Canada, (4) marking the official beginning of the end for Native American tribes, having missed their last great chance to team up with the British to block the American advance at the Ohio River, and perhaps into the Southeast.

Of course, there have been a number of documentaries made on the subject of the War of 1812, especially as the 200th anniversary of the conflict emerges. But there has been little push to make such historical live action films, for cinema or television. This is surprising given the key elements of the conflict to the history of the United States, Canada, Britain, and several Native groups.

### **Not Your Typical Propaganda Film**

As for the few War of 1812 films made, they do not even follow the traditional notion of “war movies.” And studies attempting a comprehensive overview do not always try to cast a theory about their context, save the most overly propaganda-style cinema features. Most books that study conflict in the cinema attempt to provide either a comprehensive overview of all war films,

or elaborate upon a particular genre, such as Westwall's book.<sup>3</sup> Eberwein provides the overview of war films, but also advances the thesis that contemporary history as well as attitudes on politics and culture (such as gender issues) has an impact on how the wars in the films are being portrayed.<sup>4</sup>

Films which are about a conflict may be designed to boost morale during the contemporary fighting. For example, a World War II film would be designed to boost morale during World War II. An example would be the American film "Wake Island" which was released in 1942, the year after the battle.<sup>5</sup> British films also did this practice.<sup>6</sup> Other war propaganda films focused on a subsequent set of battles (a World War II film designed to boost morale during the Korean War). An example of the latter is Japanese propaganda film "The Opium War," (1943) where the film was designed to show that Japanese hegemony would be better for Asia than Pax Britannica.<sup>7</sup> These films are designed to transmit values of courage, as well as those the country showing them purports to stand for, typically freedom, liberty, democracy, as well as a specific grievance (revenge for attack, anti-slavery, state's rights).

Certainly the War of 1812 films do not qualify as the former, since films were unavailable for another 100 years. But they also do not act as wartime films for another wartime audience. Unless you count the early stages of the Cold War, only two took place during this non-shooting "war." These two, like the others, do not seem to transmit any values of use to Cold War conflicts anyway. There's not even a strong rationale for anti-British, anti-Indian or even anti-American sentiment at any time of any of the films' releases. This leads the reader to conclude that it would seem odd to have a film about a conflict from a prior century, if it is not used as a "propaganda film" or for a contemporary motivation.

War of 1812 movies are not unique in being not directly connected to conflict at the time of a fight, or set in the past to inspire morale during a current war. The 1989 American Civil War film "Glory" would be one such example, released as the Berlin Wall was crumbling.<sup>8</sup> That film seemed designed to address domestic racial tensions more than inspire Americans against a dying Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>

Not all films were designed to motivate a country for war. A 1930 film noted by Westwell is “All Quiet on the Western Front.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than inspiring one to fight, it had the opposite effect. According to Eksteins, “Very few contemporary reviewers noted, and even later critics have generally ignored, that All Quiet was not a book about the events of the war - it was not a memoir - but an angry postwar statement about the effects of the war on the young generation that lived through it. Scenes, incidents, and images were chosen with a purpose to illustrate how the war had destroyed the ties, psychological, moral, and real, between the front generation and society at home ... All Quiet is in fact then a symptom, rather than an explanation, of the confusion and disorientation of the postwar world, particularly of the generation which reached maturity during the war.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Alfred Hitchcock’s MacGuffin**

Therefore, one could conclude that the War of 1812 has taken on the status of a “MacGuffin,” which is sometimes spelled “McGuffin.” According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the term means “an object, event or character in a film or story that serves to set and keep the plot in motion despite usually lacking intrinsic importance.”<sup>12</sup> Such a term has entered the popular lexicon of filmography and even pop culture.<sup>13</sup>

Fans of Alfred Hitchcock will no doubt recognize this movie feature of his films, where this plot device sets the story in motion, but, in the end, is unrelated to the conclusion of the film. For example, the money stolen by the secretary in the film “Psycho” explain her flight from the city to the interstate and a lonely motel, but is unrelated to the point of the film. The fictional identity of “George Caplan” in the Hitchcock film “North by Northwest” gets Cary Grant’s character into the spy mix, but turns out to be more of a sideshow by the conclusion. It has been noted that the “MacGuffin” is not limited to Hitchcock films, as it has been used before in “Citizen Kane” (“Rosebud”) and the African medical clinic in “The Last King of Scotland,” about the Uganda dictator Idi Amin and his white physician.

In this way, such films could be loosely seen as historical dramas, but little of these films deals with the War of 1812 as a central feature. The points of each are not propaganda, inspiring

contemporary or future conflicts. They are more about entertainment value, either showing some form of drama, romance, or intrigue. The War of 1812 simply kickstarts the plot, but the importance of the conflict becomes little more than a sideshow by the conclusion of the cinema.

### **The War of 1812 Movies**

“The Buccaneer” (1938)<sup>14</sup>

The coverage of the War of 1812 in movies began nearly 125 years after that conflict when noted director Cecil B. DeMille put together the film “The Buccaneer.” The Paramount Pictures film covers the events leading up to the Battle of New Orleans, the final major engagement of the War of 1812. It starts with the pressures faced by Jean Lafitte (Frederic March), “the buccaneer,” as Americans and British are vying for his services for the coming fight in New Orleans (where the film was premiered), aided by a treacherous Senator Crawford (Ian Keith), who convinces the British to attack New Orleans.

Sure enough, the Battle of New Orleans is covered in the movie. Lafitte offers to fight for the Americans for the freedom of his men, who have been captured from Baratavia in the bayous by the U.S. forces, upon the insistence of Senator Crawford. During the battle, Lafitte and his men defeat the Scottish soldiers while General Andrew Jackson (Hugh Southern) handles the rest of the British Army.

But it is difficult to conclude that this is primarily a War of 1812 movie. It is more of a “pirate” movie, popularized during the time. Much of the film is a romance between Lafitte and Annette de Remy (Margot Grahame), a high society lady whose sister Marie disappeared on a ship “The Corinthian” taken against orders by a subordinate of Lafitte’s, Captain Brown (Robert Barrat). When it is discovered that Lafitte’s men were responsible for the death of Annette’s sister and all aboard (the sole survivor, a Dutch girl named Gretchen, inopportunistly wears Marie’s dress at a party), the pirate gallantly takes the blame for actions he did not approve. But just before he faces the hangman’s noose, he and his men and Gretchen (Franciska Gaal) are allowed to leave by General Jackson for services rendered by him and his pirates at the Battle of New Orleans.

Historian Donald Hickey confirms the role and scope of Lafitte's (Laffite's, by some spelling) Baratavia economy, the U.S. desire to shut it down, the desire of the British to enlist his services in exchange for land and a captain's commission and the U.S. raid on his operations.<sup>15</sup> But Hickey would dispute a number of elements of the film.<sup>16</sup> First, there is no evidence Lafitte played a role in the battle, much less the decisive one. He did not provide the guns and ammo (most were taken in the raid). He offered local knowledge, but was unlikely to have even been present at the battle that day. His men made up so little of Jackson's forces. His brother Pierre played a bigger role in Jackson's victory, as an "aide de camp" of sorts. "The notion that a gentleman pirate and smuggler might have contributed to the spectacular victory at New Orleans has been too much for filmmakers, novelists and historians to resist."<sup>17</sup> Even the National Park has been named for him, regardless of what his contributions (or lack thereof) may have actually been.

"Captain Caution" (1940)<sup>18</sup>

In keeping with the pirate theme, Hollywood shifted to the story of a privateer two years later in a film directed by Richard Wallace, released by United Artists. Corunna Dorman's (Louise Platt) father (Robert Barrat), a merchant ship's captain, is killed by a British naval ship at the beginning of the War of 1812. After the initial British cannon volley, the sailor Dan Marvin (Victor Mature) recommends surrender, given the overwhelming odds of against the merchantman. Corunna's ship, "The Olive Branch," is captured. While in British custody, Corunna, Dan Marvin, and the other crewmen meet a French couple, as well as a slave trader named Slade. They are rescued by Commodore Stephen Decatur of the United States, turning the tables on the prize crew.

Once freed and back in charge of "The Olive Branch," Corunna chooses Slade, rather than Dan Marvin to be the first mate. She calls Marvin "Captain Caution" for his reticence to fight, against overwhelming odds. She sails the vessel to France to seek papers making "The Olive Branch" an American privateer. But the local consul is hesitant to do so, because the captain is a woman. In the meantime, Slade betrays Corunna and enables the British to capture her ship as a

prize, denying her quest to avenge her father's death. Slade tells an enraged Corunna that it was Marvin who pulled off the deception. Yet Marvin's sailor is the one who engineers an escape under the guise of a fistfight, rescues the girl, and exposes Slade as the traitor. As the rescuer and rescued fall in love, it is observed that women really shouldn't belong at sea.

The movie resembles the swashbuckling classic "The Black Swan" (released only a few years later) starring Tyrone Power, Maureen O'Hara, George Sanders and Anthony Quinn. There is more about dramatic romance and fight scenes than historical content. Yet both do get the audience interest in pursuing more knowledge about historical characters. For example, just as Sir Henry Morgan has a role to play in "The Black Swan," so too does "Captain Caution" have Commodore Stephen Decatur make an appearance. One wishes more of a role for him, as well as an education on privateering and its importance in the War of 1812.

Hickey describes the War of 1812 as "the largest major war in which private armed vessels played a significant role."<sup>19</sup> But while the movie puts privateers front and center, their limits are apparent. They were able "annoy an enemy's commerce and provided a source of income to merchants and sailors as well as to governments....[b]ut privateers were no substitute for a navy."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, "[P]rivateers were looking for easy prey. Profit, not patriotism, was their motivation."<sup>21</sup> And in the film, Corunna leaned toward the latter, though her motives were at least understandable, being revenge for her dead father.

Many may conclude that because Hickey, effectively dismantles the story of Louisa Baker (also known as Lucy Brewer) as a woman who appeared as a man to fight on the USS Constitution, that he would conclude the "Captain Caution" story would be a fiction.<sup>22</sup> But Hickey does find women who either served on ships, or tagged along for a ride, either as wives, girlfriends.<sup>23</sup> Some would even serve during combat by helping with cannons or tending to the wounded. And while none commanded even a privateer, Commodore Stephen Decatur (who appears in the film) did employ two nurses on the U.S.S. United States. Perhaps that story inspired the film.

Privateers are front and center in the "Captain Caution" story. Privateers were central to the pre-war American strategy for conflict at sea. "If it came to war, he [Jefferson] theorized, the

enemy's merchant shipping could be harried by American privateers, which would take the place of a deep-sea navy....Except for completing Jefferson's gunboat program when he took office in 1809, Madison ignored the Navy."<sup>24</sup> Some historians and economists have even suggested that such ships "won" the naval war. But that contention is somewhat overstated.<sup>25</sup> Prior arguments that privateers captured more than U.S. Navy ships did are undermined when their record is examined with a ship-to-prize ratio. Privateers captured more only because there were so many of them; many of their prizes were retaken. Moreover, "privateering's greatest drawback was its inefficiency: of approximately 515 privateers and 'letters of marque' commissioned, 300 never succeeded in capturing a single English ship, and the British claimed the capture or destruction of some 250 of them."<sup>26</sup>

But there are ways in which privateers did matter in the War of 1812. First, their mere presence jacked up insurance rates, leading angry shippers to lean on the British government. Second, we often forget the role British privateers (especially operating out of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) hurt American shipping.<sup>27</sup> Neither element of their success is depicted in the movie, but are nonetheless critical to understanding the true role of the privateer during this time.

"Fighting Kentuckian" (1949)<sup>28</sup>

Hollywood took a break from movies linked to the War of 1812 during World War II, but returned from it a few years later with "The Fighting Kentuckian." This Republic Pictures film, directed by George Waggner, is fairly complicated, and its connection to the War of 1812 is somewhat loose at best. The film deals with the tale of French soldiers who once served Napoleon, xenophobic locals, and regiments of American soldiers headed back to Kentucky by way of Alabama after the fighting concluded. A love triangle exists between the daughter (Vera Ralston) of a French General (Hugo Haas), a Kentucky soldier (John Wayne) and a wealthy local (John Howard). Also appearing are treacherous locals (Grant Withers, Paul Fix, Marie Windsor) and other soldiers (Oliver Hardy, Jack Pennick).

During the romance between the Kentucky soldier (John Breen) and the French officer's daughter (Fleurette), the former discovers a plot by locals like Grant Hayden to engineer a war

between Alabamans and the French. After the backstabbing and double-dealing, along with some moments of nobility, the Kentucky regiments wind up helping drive off the attack, saving the new French residents, freeing up the couple to be married.

The film may somewhat embellish the role of the Kentuckians at the Battle of New Orleans, according to Hickey.<sup>29</sup> Cannons, as well as the more numerous muskets, mattered more for destroying the British than the careful aim of the Kentuckians on a smoke-shrouded field. Elting contends that only 700 of the nearly 2,500 Kentucky militia members were even armed.<sup>30</sup> A song about their accomplishments may have embellished the perception of their prowess in the American mindset, according to Hickey.<sup>31</sup>

While there is little evidence of French fighting extensively on behalf of the United States, save a naval distraction from the Napoleonic Wars, there was fighting in Alabama.<sup>32</sup> Elting documents the attempts of the British to regroup after the New Orleans disaster, the taking of Ft. Bowyer near Mobile, the ineffective American relief effort, and the discovery that peace was at hand.<sup>33</sup>

“Mutiny” (1952)<sup>34</sup>

If the “Fighting Kentuckian” is only loosely linked to the War of 1812, “Mutiny” is far more connected with the conflict. The opening scenes deal with a British impressment of American sailors under duress, including one who jumps overboard rather than be taken into British service, with marines firing into the water at the swimmer. Americans argue about whether or not war is warranted, only to learn that it has been declared.

From then on, the film by United Artists (directed by Edward Dmytryk) falls into a more traditional screenplay, though more of a suspense than a romance. American Captain Jim Marshall is ordered to sail “The Concorde” to France for a \$10 million loan in gold. Captain Marshall (actor: Mark Stevens) hires former British skipper Ben Waldridge (relieved of command for stealing the ship’s payroll) as his first mate. Waldridge (actor: Patric Knowles) only accepts the humiliating demotion because the trip would allow him to be reunited with his

wife, Leslie (actress: Angela Lansbury), whose expensive tastes explain the decision to take the British ship payroll.

Greedy seamen, along with the avaricious Leslie, conspire with First Mate Waldrige to commit a mutiny, and take the gold. But Waldrige's loyalties are divided. After all, while he helped *The Concorde* escape the British fleet, Captain Marshall helped save his life, and offered half credit for a successful mission. So during the mutiny, he slips the means for Captain Marshall to eventually escape, telling the others that the American ship's master is dead. Marshall makes his way back to America where he is allowed to pursue "The Concorde," on the verge unloading the gold. Leslie and the mutineers perish, as does Waldrige, though his sacrifice came while helping Captain Marshall, instead of opposing him. In death, Waldrige is hailed a hero.

For plots and intrigue, "Mutiny" is consistent with "Captain Caution" and "The Fighting Kentuckian." While it lacks the introduction of famous characters like Jean Lafitte, or Stephen Decatur, it does cover concerns over impressment, at least at the onset. Yet it is still a "Hollywood" drama movie more than a historical fiction film, like so many others. Like the others, the war is the "MacGuffin," putting the plot in motion, but irrelevant to the point or conclusion of the film. It could be any number of historical conflicts, real or imaginary.

Was the subject of impressment merely a mythological cause of the War of 1812? Hickey contends that the impressment of U.S. ships and prevention of the new commercial power from trading with France and her allies infringed upon American sovereignty and contributed to U.S. anger.<sup>35</sup> He does note that the British did offer to repeal the controversial Orders-in-Council just before war was declared, but insisted on some licensing arrangement that would still impair American independence and raised all kinds of implementation questions. James covers the Orders-in-Council only briefly, as his chief concern involves trying to prove that every British ship that faced an American counterpart was outgunned.<sup>36</sup>

Impressment certainly was not the only factor, as some Americans had designs on Canada, the presence of Native American raids that settlers felt were egged on by the British, as well as lingering unresolved issues left over from the American Revolutionary War.

“Last of the Buccaneers” (1950)<sup>37</sup>

Like “Mutiny,” seafaring movies related to stealing ships and piracy continued into the 1950s, with another pair of movies about Jean Lafitte. As with the 1938 movie “The Buccaneer,” the Columbia Pictures cinematic production “Last of the Buccaneers” from 1950 (directed by Lew Landers) has the War of 1812 play only a minor role. As with the other films, the conflict between America and Britain is a MacGuffin, setting the plot in motion, a better fit for the Hitchcock trope than one released nine years later. But it has little to do with the plot, as it shifts quickly to romance, piracy, and a conflict between Spain and one of its former colonies: the South American country of Venezuela.

The film begins with Lafitte, played by Paul Henreid, helping General Andrew Jackson win the Battle of New Orleans, and falls in love with the niece (Belle Summers, played by Karin Booth) of a local shipping magnate (Edgar Barrier, who portrays George Mareval). Then the plot takes him to Venezuela, where the country is attempting to break free of Spanish domination. From a new base in Galveston, he and his men raid ships from Spain, not America. But then a captain of his (Cragg Brown, played by actor Harry Cording) goes rogue and takes an American ship. Though Lafitte has him hanged, Belle thinks her lover is responsible, and informs the U.S. authorities. They raid his base in Galveston, Texas, but a confederate named Swallow (Mary Anderson) hides the loot. Lafitte and Belle are reconciled when she learns the truth. It ends with the two sailing off on a fishing boat.

“The Buccaneer” (1959)<sup>38</sup>

Cecile B. De Mille returned Jean Lafitte to the silver screen almost a decade later with his remake of “The Buccaneer” from 20 years earlier. Instead, he was a producer, not a director (Anthony Quinn got the nod for that job). Yul Brynner ably performed the pirate Lafitte, who is the king of Baratavia, a hideaway in the Louisiana swamps, which doubles as a local flea market for stolen goods frequented by folks from New Orleans. But the authorities are never able to catch them in the act. The daughter of the governor falls in love with him. Her sister (Marie)

takes her wedding gown to leave with her fiancé, but a duplicitous Captain Brown (Robert F. Simon) captures the ship, takes the goods and burns the vessel. Lafitte arrives too late, only able to rescue a single person, a young cabin boy named Miggs. But he has Brown hung at sea for his crime. The rest of the film includes attempts by the British to convince Lafitte to work for them as local scouts. The Americans seem more likely to try and capture the pirate than woo him to their side. But even though the navy destroys his base and takes his men, he sides with the U.S., if only to free his captured men and get his cargo back.

The climax of the film is the Battle of New Orleans. Even with loud bagpipes signaling the march of the Scottish Highlanders, Americans can't seem to see their foes through the fog. But Lafitte finds a way to use a flaming object as a beacon for cannon and musket fire, bravely getting as close to the enemy lines as possible, thus becoming the hero of the day for General Andrew Jackson's (Charlton Heston) victorious forces. Lafitte is the toast of New Orleans, until Captain Brown's daughter Bonnie (Claire Bloom) wears the wedding dress to the party, and Miggs is discovered by a young girl at the same soiree. A noose hovers above Lafitte, but he is given a brief head start by Jackson and Governor Claiborne (E.G. Marshall), where he and Bonnie sail away for Galveston.

Unlike "Captain Caution," "Last of the Buccaneers" and "Mutiny," the War of 1812 appears near the end of the film, with the Battle of New Orleans being front and center. But it is still a MacGuffin in that it remains a pirate romance. The war brings the lovers together, and sets up the pirate dilemma. Outside of the Battle of New Orleans, it is a plot that (with a few tweaks), could be set during the War of Spanish Succession, some Napoleonic War, or even the South American revolutions, as "The Last of the Buccaneers" did.

As for the battle itself, it has been the subject of myth. As with the overstated contribution of the "Kentucky Rifle," there is the alternate contention that the battle was not so lopsided, and the Americans were lucky to have prevailed. Much of this assumes captured American guns across the river would be turned on the U.S. position, but the gun crews evidently spiked their cannons before fleeing.<sup>39</sup> This new myth plays into the hands of the movie, in that Lafitte's participation could have been that narrow edge given to the Americans, despite the lopsided casualty figures.

Elting claims only a few pirates participated in the fighting;<sup>40</sup> their chief contribution seems to be not joining the British and giving the invaders local knowledge.<sup>41</sup> “The point is not that the British army was irrevocably doomed on that fateful day,” Hickey writes.<sup>42</sup> “Rather it is merely to suggest that to win the British needed more ... the British army needed a lot more luck than it got. The British were never close to victory, and it would have taken better planning and execution as well as exceptional luck to change the outcome of battle.”

It is interesting how many movies concerning the Battle of New Orleans depict the role of pirates who may not have even been present, but ignore the role of Native Americans who did show up and contribute mightily, like the Choctaw Nation, who not only participated in greater numbers than Lafitte and his men, but made real, documented contributions to the American victory.<sup>43</sup> In the next section, we'll see how Native Americans played a role in War of 1812 movie subjects.

“Brave Warrior” (1952)<sup>44</sup>

Though the Choctaw warriors fought on Jackson's side, there was an attempt by Tecumseh to recruit them to the Shawnee side that opposed the Americans. But the Choctaw rebuffed them.<sup>45</sup> Tecumseh himself has been the subject of two movies: “Brave Warrior” from 1952 and “Tecumseh: Last Warrior,” more than 40 years later.

For the film “Brave Warrior,” the setting takes place before the War of 1812 begins, though some lump the Tippecanoe battle of 1811 in with the overall war. But the film diverges significantly from the history of Tecumseh. You could almost say it has a 1950s significant retelling of the history to provide a positive light for traditional friend and foe who become secret allies, in the way that “King Richard and the Crusaders has the title character form a bond with Saladin. Or “Jupiter's Darling” features a Roman vixen falling for Hannibal, with an eventual happy truce arranged between Romans and Carthaginians.

The Columbia Pictures 1952 film, directed by Spencer Gordon Bennet, has Tecumseh (Jay Silverheels) and the Americans under Governor William Henry Harrison (James Seay) trying to come to some sort of accommodation over land. There are also other attempts at harmony in

another way, as the Indian warrior falls in love with Linda MacGregor (Christine Larson), the daughter of a trader. But their efforts at unity are hampered by a group of traders like Shayne MacGregor (Linda's father, played by Harry Cording) and Barney Demming (more of an outlaw, portrayed by George Eldredge), who are more like traitors than traders. These traders are assisted by the British like General Proctor (Leslie Denison) and "the Prophet," (Michael Ansara) Tecumseh's jealous brother who is eager to attack the Americans in retaliation for having lost an eye to them. The plan is to drive a wedge between the Shawnee and Americans. In the end, Laura winds up with Steve Ruddell (Jon Hall), an American emissary from President James Madison. The pro-British traders are defeated and the Prophet (not Harrison) burns Tippecanoe. Though the good guys have "won" the damage is done and the two friends have been successfully divided.

In the "Brave Warrior" film, the prelude to the War of 1812, is the classic MacGuffin. While the impending fight brings Tecumseh and the Americans into conflict, the film is still more about whether or not Indians and whites can coexist, both as neighbors and as lovers. The drive to war still takes a backseat to the treachery of traders, the conniving of the British, and the ineffective jealous ambition of Tenskwatawa, Tecumseh's brother, also known as "the Prophet." The story could have just as easily been called Crazy Horse, change the time, setting, and other character names.

"Tecumseh: the Last Warrior" (1995)<sup>46</sup>

More than forty years later, Tecumseh's story would again grace the silver screen. Though the portrayal of the Shawnee chief would be dramatically different, it follows the concept of the War of 1812 as being more of a sideshow to the film's story.

Unlike "Brave Warrior," the 1995 film by American Zoetrope Production Company was made for television. It also follows the actual story of Tecumseh<sup>47</sup> far more closely than the feel-good 1950s retelling of the tale. It starts the day before the climatic "Battle of the Thames" in Canada with Governor Harrison (David Clennon), providing the MacGuffin or the rationale for the story to go forward. This part is narrated by Star Watcher (Jeri Arredondo), Tecumseh's mother. But

this is not a War of 1812 movie. It jumps back to the night Tecumseh (Jesse Borrego) was born, how he got his name, his great lineage, how he met his wife, how he ran from his first battle, and how he triumphed in his next skirmish. In other words, it's a story about Tecumseh, not about the War of 1812.

Along the way, the film, based upon the book Panther in the Sky by James Alexander Thom, covers other related subjects. It shows the 1794 Battle of Fallen Timbers, displays William Henry Harrison's ambition, reveals how Tecumseh came to have a white brother, shows the Battle of Tippecanoe, and covers the alliance of necessity between Tecumseh and the British. The film, directed by Larry Elikann also provides more of a stirring critique of the American position than any of the other films noted here. It is surprising that while the film is more accurate than "Brave Warrior's" Tecumseh story, it leaves out key elements of his life story, such as his friendship with Major-General Isaac Brock, the capture of Detroit, and the siege of Fort Meigs. It does not cover his noted penchant for opposing the use of torture of captives. And it makes the conflicts covered (Battle of Fallen Timbers, Battle of the Thames) seem more evenly matched than the historical record might support, while the portrayal is not so unrealistic as to detract much from the film.

There are a number of myths associated with Tecumseh. The subtitle of the film is "The Last Warrior," but even Tecumseh's impact in history is somewhat exaggerated. He did have his positive attributes. Hickey notes that the Shawnee leader came closer than any other to forging a grand Native American coalition, and his alliance with General Isaac Brock produced a strong team that caused all kinds of problems for the American forces under Generals Harrison and Hull. But in the end, he contends that the Native Americans lost the most during the War of 1812.

Yet Tecumseh was not the "Last Warrior," or even the most important leader of coalition. The honor at that time went to his brother, Tenskwatawa, also known as "the Prophet".<sup>48</sup> While Tecumseh opposed torturing prisoners, he rarely took them in the first place. He never held power the film may have imagined that he had, nor was he always in the British camp, or opposed to Americans until after the 1809 treaty.<sup>49</sup> His influence over Shawnees began to

decline even before the War of 1812, and there may actually have been more Shawnee fighting for America than Britain at the climactic Battle of the Thames.<sup>50</sup>

### **Conclusion: The War of 1812 as a Silver Screen Sideshow.**

Analysis of the films involving The War of 1812 indicates that the subject is not covered well by Hollywood. Only a small handful of films even note the subject, and none of them has the film occupy a central theme of the movie.

The War of 1812 does not fit the role of the propaganda film to inspire during that conflict or serves as a past reminder of history, events and values to motivate people during another contemporary conflict, as a World War II movie might boost morale during the Korean War.

This does not mean that The War of 1812 is relegated to a cameo appearance then and now. It occupies the position of the plot device known as “the MacGuffin,” popularized by Alfred Hitchcock. Thus, the war often sets the plot in motion, though by the end of the film, it is inconsequential to the conclusion, replaced by the narrow storyline concerning the characters involving romance, intrigue, drama, treachery, honor, or even a brave last stand.

Even some of the film subjects covered seems like odd choices. One would think that at least one biography of Andrew Jackson would be made, rather than three on Jean Lafitte, given the former’s greater importance for our nation, as well as a contribution of the Battle of New Orleans. Similarly, the exploits of the USS Constitution (“Old Ironsides”) and the unprecedented capture of British squadrons at Lake Erie and Lake Champlain would make a good film subject, instead of a fictional privateer and a British ship during the Napoleonic Era (“Master and Commander”). One may be surprised to see no film on the origins of the Star Spangled Banner and the successful defense of Baltimore after the destruction of Washington, DC, though Baltimore is fictionally nuked in a contrived conflict with Russia in a Tom Clancy novel-turned movie.

As we are in the midst of its 200th anniversary of the conflict, the absence of Hollywood interest in these films boggles the mind, especially as politicians lament the absence of history knowledge among students and studios recycle superhero movies and sequels as if desperate for a good film. But as history shows, even should another film on the War of 1812 make it into the cinema, it is likely to occupy the role of another plot device known as the MacGuffin, luring the viewer into the story, but being unimportant in the end, unlike the real conflict.

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### **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Historyonfilm.com. "How has Hollywood treated the War of 1812?" December 27, 2012 <http://historyonfilm.com/hollywood-1812/> (accessed January 27, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Of these, the site includes both movies titled "The Buccaneer" involving Cecil B. DeMille, "Captain Caution," "Mutiny" and "Brave Warrior."

<sup>3</sup> Westwell, Guy. War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line. London: Wallflower Press, 2006, <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=96Myji48hMQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=War+Cinema+Guy+Westwell&hl=en&sa=X&ei=rrkAUatehNj0BL2BgeAF&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA> (accessed Jan. 8, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Eberwein, Robert T. The War Film. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005, [http://books.google.com.au/books/about/The\\_War\\_Film.html?id=2YBIg-iwfUUC](http://books.google.com.au/books/about/The_War_Film.html?id=2YBIg-iwfUUC) (accessed Jan. 8, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Turner Classic Movies: "Wake Island," 1942. <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/115758%7C0/Wake-Island.html> (accessed Jan. 28, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Coultass, Clive "British Feature Films and the Second World War." Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), pp. 7-22, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/260996?uid=3739616&uid=2133&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4>

[&uid=3739256&sid=21101549991881](#) (accessed Jan. 8, 2013) and MacKenzie, S. P. British War Films, 1939-1945. London & NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003, [http://books.google.com/books/about/BRITISH\\_WAR\\_FILMS\\_1939\\_45.html?id=3EkhuNaqkOUC](http://books.google.com/books/about/BRITISH_WAR_FILMS_1939_45.html?id=3EkhuNaqkOUC). (accessed Jan. 23, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Desser, David "From the Opium War to the Pacific War: Japanese Propaganda Films of World War II." Film History, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 32-48, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3815159?uid=3739616&uid=2133&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21101549991881> (accessed Jan. 8, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Eberwein, The War Film.

<sup>9</sup> Glatthar, Joseph T. "'Glory,' the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry, and Black Soldiers in the Civil War." The History Teacher, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Aug., 1991), pp. 475-485, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/494706?uid=3739616&uid=2133&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21101549991881> (accessed Jan. 23, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Westwell, War Cinema.

<sup>11</sup> Eksteins, Modris "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War." Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr., 1980), p. 351, <http://www.csub.edu/~mbaker2/eksteins.pdf> (accessed Jan. 8, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: "MacGuffin." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/macguffin?show=0&t=1359261041> (accessed Jan. 26, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Rich, Frank. "Journal; The Paramount McGuffin," The New York Times, February 10, 1994. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/02/10/opinion/journal-the-paramount-mcguffin.html> (accessed Jan. 10, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Turner Classic Movies: "The Buccaneer," 1938. <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/69824/The-Buccaneer/> (accessed Dec. 17, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Hickey, Donald R., Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006, p. 282.

<sup>16</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 283.

<sup>17</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 284.

<sup>18</sup> Turner Classic Movies: "Captain Caution," 1940.

<http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/70225/Captain-Caution/> (accessed Dec. 17, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 199-200.

<sup>23</sup> Hickey, Myths, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> Elting, John R. Amateurs To Arms! A Military History of the War of 1812. Chapel Hill, NC: Da Capo Press, 1991, p. 68.

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<sup>26</sup> Elting, Amateurs, p. 81-82.

<sup>27</sup> Tures, Privateers.

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- <sup>29</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 284.
- <sup>30</sup> Elting, *Amateurs*, p. 81-82.
- <sup>31</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 284.
- <sup>32</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 118-119
- <sup>33</sup> Elting, *Amateurs*, p. 304.
- <sup>34</sup> Turner Classic Movies: “Mutiny,” 1952. <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/19032/Mutiny/> (accessed Dec. 17, 2012).
- <sup>35</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, pp. 1-6.
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- <sup>37</sup> Turner Classic Movies: “Last of the Buccaneers,” 1950. <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/27645/Last-of-the-Buccaneers/> (accessed Dec. 17, 2012).
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- <sup>40</sup> Elting, *Amateurs*, p. 303.
- <sup>41</sup> Elting, *Amateurs*, p. 287.
- <sup>42</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 285-286.
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- <sup>46</sup> Turner Classic Movies: “Tecumseh: The Last Warrior,” 1995, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/304644/Tecumseh/> (accessed Dec. 17, 2012).
- <sup>47</sup> *The Encyclopedia of the War of 1812, Volume II*. Spencer C. Tucker, ed. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012, pp. 700-701.
- <sup>48</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 181.
- <sup>49</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 182.
- <sup>50</sup> Hickey, *Myths*, p. 183.