
Reviewed by Donald E. Graves

Carl Benn has done an excellent job of editing two well known aboriginal memoirs of the War of 1812, that of the Sauk chief, Black Hawk and that of William Apess, a member of the Pequot people. Benn has spent considerable effort to obtain the most accurate versions of these two memoirs and has annotated them in a very exemplary and scholarly fashion. More than that -- and that in itself is quite an achievement: he not only sets the two men in their time and place with introductory essays, he also contributes a 24-page "chronological overview," which is actually an essay covering aboriginal participation in the War of 1812 in the northern theatre. This essay contains very useful estimates of the numerical strength of the warriors in selected engagements.

The memoir of Makataimeshekiakian or Black Hawk is a fascinating and historically important document. Black Hawk not only fought on the British side throughout the war, he was the Sauk leader in the 1832 conflict that bears his name and in which he fought against Winfield Scott and future presidents Zachary Taylor and Abraham Lincoln. As well re-constructing Black Hawk's memoir of his life from about 1803 to 1816, Benn has added several important speeches he made of officers of the British Indian Department in the postwar period, which are not usually consulted by American historians.

Black Hawk participated in most of the major campaigns and battles of the Upper Lakes in 1812 to 1814. He was a keen and shrewd observer of the white man and his ways and his succinct and accurate observations on the white way of war is worth repeating at length:

   Instead of stealing upon each other and taking every advantage to kill the enemy and save their own people as we do (which with us is considered good policy in a war chief), they marched out in open daylight and fight regardless of the number of warriors they may lose. After the battle is over they retire to feast and drink wine as if nothing had happened, after which they make a statement in writing of what they have done, each party claiming the victory and neither giving an account of half the number that have been killed on their own side. They all fought like braves but would not do to lead a war party with us. Our maxim is "to kill the enemy and save our own men." Those chiefs would do to paddle a canoe but not to steer it.

William Apess is a much different man than Black Hawk. A member of a people who were living in an area dominated by whites, he received some schooling before being indentured to a hard and cruel master. At the age of fifteen he ran away and joined the American army in which, he admits,
"he could drink rum, play cards and act as wickedly as any." As a drummer in an artillery unit, Apess fought at the battles of Chateauguay in 1813 and LaColle Mill in 1814. He was either discharged or deserted from the army in 1815, after which he led a dissolute life for a number of years until he found religion and became a devout Methodist but continued to struggle with alcohol until his death in 1839 at the age of 41. His memoir was published in 1829, with a revised edition appearing in 1831. Carl Benn has carefully annotated this work, which tends to be full of inaccuracies and, in doing so, has given us a view of the War of 1812 from a fairly unique eyewitness.

Native Memoirs from the War of 1812 is an excellent example of how to annotate historic texts, particularly texts written by authors from non-European backgrounds. I recommend it to anyone interested in early 19th century aboriginal society and the contribution of First Nations to the War of 1812.