

# The “Children of Nature” and “Our Province” The Rev. John Strachan’s Views on the Indigenous People and the Motives Behind the American Invasion of Upper Canada, 1812-1814

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Throughout what came to be known as the War of 1812, The Rev. John Strachan wrote and spoke on a variety of topics related to the conflict. The focus of this article is on his views of the Native peoples and why he believed that Upper Canadians should embrace these “sons of nature” as brothers. It was his argument that the United States desired Upper Canada because it provided a more confined landmass within which they could exterminate the indigenous tribes and free up the West for American expansion. Strachan defended the autonomy of the Natives, the superiority of English governance, and the centrality of Upper Canada in the theatre of war. These writings both challenged the prevalent assumption at the time that Natives were simply pawns in the contest and posited a rarely examined explanation of why Upper Canada was vital to both Native and Imperial concerns.

# The “Children of Nature” and “Our Province”:

The Rev. John Strachan’s Views on the  
Indigenous People and the Motives  
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Upper Canada, 1812-1814

by James Tyler Robertson



*Strachan as a young man, possibly around the time of the War of 1812.*

The Rev. John Strachan arrived at York to assume the position of Anglican rector there the same month that America declared war on Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> Such a dramatic beginning to his ministry seemed to foreshadow that both Strachan and the muddy, isolated, under-populated village of York were destined to catapult each other to new levels of fame and prestige.<sup>2</sup> Strachan was a prolific writer during what

came to be known as the War of 1812, and he mailed out sermons, letters, societal commentaries, reports on the war and ideas about strategy to ensure that his opinion was well-known and widely-read throughout the land; especially after the American capture of York when he assumed leadership of the town.<sup>3</sup> He was nothing if not forthcoming with his opinions and critiques of various characters and events that occurred during the

<sup>1</sup> The United States of America officially declared a state of war with Great Britain on the afternoon of 18 June 1812.

<sup>2</sup> Noted Strachan biographer, J.L.H. Henderson, makes the following comment: “John Strachan arrived in York at the same time that war came again to British North America. That war was to bring the missionary and schoolmaster to a prominence he had not known before.” J.L.H. Henderson, *Canadian Biographical Studies: John Strachan 1778-1867*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 16. Although it should be noted that David Flint’s *John Strachan: Pastor and Politician* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971) states: “the Strachan family set off for Kingston in July... At Kingston the Strachans changed to a schooner and embarked on a much smoother...trip to York.” Flint, *Strachan*, 34. That would obviously mean that Strachan arrived in York much later in the summer.

<sup>3</sup> This event took place in April of 1813. For a concise rendering of this story see Carl Benn, *The Battle of York*. (Belleville: Mika Publishing, 1984) Also Barlow Cumberland, *Centennial Series War of 1812-15: The Battle of York: An Account of the Eight Hours’ Battle from the Humber Bay to the Old Fort in Defence of York on April 27, 1813*. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1913) Although a well-written and researched account, Cumberland’s treatment of the battle is decidedly more driven to increase patriotism in the minds of his readers on the centennial reminder of the celebration than is Benn’s.

## Abstract

*Throughout what came to be known as the War of 1812, The Rev. John Strachan wrote and spoke on a variety of topics related to the conflict. The focus of this article is on his views of the Native peoples and why he believed that Upper Canadians should embrace these “sons of nature” as brothers. It was his argument that the United States desired Upper Canada because it provided a more confined landmass within which they could exterminate the indigenous tribes and free up the West for American expansion. Strachan defended the autonomy of the Natives, the superiority of English governance, and the centrality of Upper Canada in the theatre of war. These writings both challenged the prevalent assumption at the time that Natives were simply pawns in the contest and posited a rarely examined explanation of why Upper Canada was vital to both Native and Imperial concerns.*

**Résumé:** *Pendant la guerre de 1812, le révérend John Strachan a écrit un nombre considérable de sermons, conférences, et articles sur divers aspects du conflit. Nous étudions ici ses idées sur les peuples autochtones et ses raisons de croire que les Haut-Canadiens devaient considérer ces “fils de la nature” comme des frères. Selon lui, les États-Unis désiraient conquérir le Haut-Canada afin d’y confiner les autochtones avant de les exterminer, ouvrant ainsi l’Ouest à la colonisation américaine. Strachan défendait l’autonomie des indigènes, la supériorité du gouvernement anglais, et l’importance du Haut-Canada dans les opérations de la guerre. Ses écrits remettent en question l’idée reçue selon laquelle les indigènes n’étaient aux yeux des Britanniques que des pions à exploiter dans la guerre. Strachan nous offre une tout autre explication de l’importance du Haut-Canada à la fois pour les autochtones et pour les intérêts impériaux.*

conflict with America.<sup>4</sup>

This article will focus on Strachan’s views of the Native/indigenous peoples early in the war and explore why he believed that Upper Canadians should embrace these “children of nature”<sup>5</sup> as brothers. It was Strachan’s belief in 1812 that the Natives were the main reason for the invasion of Upper Canada. By exploring Native dynamics in the Northwestern United States and Upper Canada, this article will challenge the old idea that the Natives were simply pawns in the war between England and America. It will also introduce Strachan’s conviction that it was America’s desire to exterminate troublesome Native populations that truly inspired its invasion of Upper Canada.

### *I. The Native Issue*

On 18 June 1812, American President James Madison declared war on Great Britain. Along with comments regarding Britain’s treatment of American sailors and maritime rights, Madison concluded his arguments for the necessity of war with the following statement:

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon L. Heath’s article “Ontario Baptists and the War of 1812” *Ontario History*, 103:2 (Autumn 2011), 41-63 does excellent work summarizing the field of scholarship related to churches in the War of 1812 in both British North America and the United States. In addition to that, Heath has also done exemplary work bringing together research related to religion in the colony that is contemporary with the struggle. Donald R. Hickey’s “The War of 1812: Still a Forgotten Conflict?” *The Journal of Military History*, 65:3 (July 2001), 741-69. Hickey’s article also presents the readers with a thorough treatment of relevant scholarship on the War of 1812, albeit from a more military perspective. Both articles provide clear and concise bibliographies for anyone desirous of a well-balanced study of the war from social, religious, and military perspectives.

<sup>5</sup> This term was used by Strachan.

In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare just renewed by the savages on one of our extensive frontiers... It is difficult to account for the activity and combinations which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence and without recollecting the authenticated examples of such interpositions heretofore furnished by the officers and agents of that Government.<sup>6</sup>

For the Americans, the use of indigenous peoples to do the dirty work of destabilizing the west was British skullduggery. Sophisticated weapons found in Prophet's Town after the Battle of Tippecanoe (7 November 1811) gave them the evidence they felt they needed to invade British North America while simultaneously being able to plead that the invasion was a defensive action taken against a hostile and threatening force.<sup>7</sup>

After taking the town of Sandwich in July of 1812, American Brigadier General Hull made the following statement about British citizens fighting with the Native people in his battle proclamation:

If the barbarous and Savage policy of Great Britain be pursued, and the savages are let

loose to murder our Citizens and butcher our women and children, this war, will be a war of extermination. The first stroke with the Tomahawk the first attempt with the Scalping Knife will be the Signal for an indiscriminate scene of desolation, *No White man found fighting by the Side of an Indian will be taken prisoner* Instant destruction will be his Lot.<sup>8</sup>

The fear of a British-Native alliance is evident in this quote and the American Northwest Army quickly endorsed Hull's statement that no mercy would be extended to those who fought alongside Natives. As will be seen later, such fear and contempt towards the Natives would form an important part of Strachan's critique of American policies.

The antagonism between Native communities and the Americans would be a frequent theme within Strachan's writings on the subject. He understood that the Native-American war predated any contest between America and England and he argued, "if we do not employ these people they will employ themselves—they have been at war with the United States from some years."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, he also challenged contemporary notions that the Natives were nothing more than pawns of both the Ameri-

<sup>6</sup> Irving Brant, *James Madison: Commander in Chief, 1812-1836* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), 312.

<sup>7</sup> The following is an excerpt from the speech given by Brigadier-General William Hull after the American capture of Sandwich: "Inhabitants of Canada! After thirty years of Peace and prosperity, the United States have been driven to Arms, The injuries and aggressions, the insults and indignities of Great Britain have *once more* left them no alternative but manly resistance...I come to *find* enemies not *make* them, I come to *protect* not to *injure* you." Found in Carl F. Klinck. *Tecumseh: Fact and Fiction in Early Records*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 131.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>9</sup> John Strachan, "Letter to John Richardson, 30 September 1812." In *The John Strachan Letter Book: 1812-1834*. Edited by George W. Spragge (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1946), 17.

cans and the British.

Modern scholarship supports Strachan in this regard. In his cartographical approach to the war, Robert Surtees explored well-known battles as well as less significant skirmishes to challenge the belief that the Native people were simply “red pawns.” After reviewing maps of battles where a Native presence was pronounced and ones where it was scarce, he wrote:

East of the lower Thames it appears as a conflict between the two European powers with the Indians playing only a supporting role on either side; in the Old Northwest, however, it would seem to have been a war between the Americans with some Indian support on the one hand, and the majority of the Indians, with the British from Canada playing a supporting role on the other hand.<sup>10</sup>

He concluded that the War of 1812 was part of a larger, on-going war between certain Native tribes and the American government.

What events specifically motivated Natives to take up arms against the Americans in 1812? In his work on the role religion played in the early nineteenth-century move to unite Native tribes in the Michigan, Ohio and Indiana territories, Herbert Goltz argues that the Herculean

military and political efforts achieved by Tecumseh originated in a spiritual vision his brother received. Tenskwatawa, popularly known as The Prophet, stated in 1805 that he had received a message from the Great Spirit that gave him, among other ideas,<sup>11</sup> a theological mandate to engage in warfare against the American people. He reported that the Great Spirit told him:

I am the Father of the English, of the Spaniards and of the Indians...But the Americans I did not make. They are not my children but the children of the Evil Spirit. They grew from the scum of the great water when it was troubled by the Evil Spirit and the froth was driven into the woods by a strong east wind. They are very numerous but I hate them. They are unjust—they have taken away your lands which were not made for them.<sup>12</sup>

In essence, the Prophet’s vision was a theological foil to the burgeoning idea of American Manifest Destiny.

William Henry Harrison (1773-1841), then governor of the Indiana Territory, inadvertently lifted The Prophet to new status in 1806 when his challenge to the Delawares to, “ask [The Prophet] to cause the sun to stand still...[because] If he does these things you may believe he has been sent by God”<sup>13</sup> coincided with

<sup>10</sup> Robert J. Surtees, “Indian Participation in the War of 1812: A Cartographic Approach.” In *The Western District: Papers From the Western District Conference*. Edited by K.G. Pryke and L.L. Kulisek, 42-48. (Windsor: Essex County Historical Society and The Western District Council, 1983), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Some of those ideas included refusing to consume alcohol, a return to a more devout and pious life and the forced conversion of any other Natives who did not agree.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert C.W. Goltz, “The Indian Revival Religion and the Western District, 1805-1813.” In *The Western District: Papers From the Western District Conference*, edited by K.G. Pryke and L.L. Kulisek, 18-32. (Windsor: Essex County Historical Society and The Western District Council, 1983), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Logan Esary (ed.), *Messages and Letters of Governor William Henry Harrison, 2 Volumes*. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 1:182-4.

a total solar eclipse. Harrison's attempt to theologically discredit the Prophet only reinforced Native hopes that a powerful religious leader had arrived to lead them.

Harrison was not alone in his condemnation of the Prophet's vision. He actually had support within certain Shawnee communities. A Shawnee tribal leader by the name of Black Hoof argued against the Prophet and stated:

"the Shawnees and the Americans were 'dropped on the same island'...and because of the common creation of Indians and Americans, both 'ought to be bound in the ties of friendship.'"<sup>14</sup> Black Hoof's statements resonated with members of the Miamis, Delawares, and Wyandots who feared "the very real threat of violence posed by [the Prophet's] supporters"<sup>15</sup> and even some Métis and Native fur-traders, concerned with what a war would do to their industry, used their



*An 1830 painting by George Catlin of Tenskwatawa, more commonly known as The Prophet. He was Tecumseh's brother and responsible for giving the burgeoning Native alliance a theological/spiritual mandate. (Courtesy of the Native American Encyclopedia)*

wealth and influence to ally their kin to America. Therefore, Native involvement in the war was not guaranteed and those who did appear willing to fight did not necessarily reflect the majority opinion even within their own tribes. However, it would take a violent conflict between Harrison and Tenskwatawa at the home of the two militant Shawnee brothers to push the tensions of the Old Northwest into the impending theatre of war in Upper Canada.

## II. Native Motives

If the Indian issue was one of the prominent motives for America to declare war, the Battle of Tippecanoe proved to be a deciding factor for two reasons.<sup>16</sup> The first was that, in the wake of the battle, leadership in the young Native confederacy shifted from Tenskwatawa to his brother, Tecumseh. The belief that the Great Spirit

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Warren, *The Shawnees and Their Neighbors, 1795-1870*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 26. Quoting Leonard U. Hill, *John Johnston and the Indians in the Land of the Three Miamis*. (Columbus: Stoneman Press, 1957), 52.

<sup>15</sup> Warren, *Neighbors*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Berton credits this fight with supplying the final provocation that the Native tribes needed to join the British force. He writes, "for the Indians, [The Battle of Tippecanoe] will be the final incident that provokes them to follow Tecumseh to Canada, there to fight on the British side in the War of 1812." *The Invasion of Canada, 1812-1813*. (Canada: Anchor, 1980), 69.



*Twentieth-century drawing by C.W. Jefferys of the meeting between Isaac Brock and Tecumseh. Strachan lauded Brock's use of Native and legend has it that both men were impressed upon meeting each other. (Pictorial History of Canada, vol. 2, xx)*

was on the side of the Natives against overwhelming American numbers crumbled after Harrison's successful attack on the Prophet's village in 1811. In *A Wampum Denied*, Sandy Antal claims, "Having led the warriors into this defeat, the Prophet suffered a loss of influence and Tecumseh assumed the leadership of the virtually dissolved Native movement."<sup>17</sup> The call for a Native alliance shifted from the theological-spiritual to the military. The second reason is that Tecumseh's seemingly tireless efforts to unite the tribes included appeals to the British for support against any future conflict in the western frontier

of the United States. While the official position of the British Indian Department at Fort Malden counseled patience and restraint, men like Brock and Indian-Agent Matthew Elliot saw the wisdom in sustaining a cordial relationship with Tecumseh. Therefore, as leadership changed hands in the Native alliance and tensions continued to rise among Americans, British and Natives, attention to the use of disgruntled Natives for the defense of Upper Canada became more prominent. That the Natives were central to those plans is evidenced by Elliot's December 1811 letter to his superiors in which he requested more troops for Amherstburg in order to, "give the Indians confidence in our sincerity" and gain the ability to strike quickly at American targets such as Detroit. It was his contention, "That once done, the Indians, with some regular troops, would keep the Americans at bay" before reassuring his leaders that, "the Indians may be depended upon."<sup>18</sup> Thus, did the skirmish at Tippecanoe usher in an increased, and much more pragmatic, military dimension to the Native alliance that also gave greater clarity, at least from an Upper-Canadian perspective, to what a British-Native alliance could accom-

<sup>17</sup> Sandy Antal, *A Wampum Denied: Procter's War of 1812*. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1998), 20. Surtees agrees with Antal's assessment and writes, "the Indians could not enter the war against the Americans with their previous confidence that God was on their side. From this point on they were on their own." Surtees, "Revival," 27.

<sup>18</sup> Esary, *Harrison*, 1:661.

plish for both parties.

Allan Eckert's sweeping epic about Tecumseh, *A Sorrow in our Heart*, speaks of the distinguished and greatly admired warrior's pleasure when the Americans eventually turned their attention to Upper Canada. Tecumseh's followers in the Ohio Valley, alongside Great Britain, could finally engage in a battle that he had seen coming and had been preparing to fight. Eckert writes,

[Tecumseh] immediately stated that he and his followers were allies to the British... In preparation for this eventuality of war... for several weeks prior to this time Tecumseh had been sending, from Tippecanoe, small parties of twenty to forty warriors toward the Detroit area.<sup>19</sup>

The Americans believed that the Natives were too scattered and frightened to pose any serious threat. However, with British support, the Indians were a deadly force that could potentially overrun the western front of the American force.

While Tecumseh receives a great amount of attention in historical writings, his was only one voice—one idea—among many and to presume that Natives spoke with one voice at that time would be “a fiction at best.”<sup>20</sup> What is apparent is that while these “children of nature” were exploited by the Americans for their land and by the British for their anger and in-

dignation, they had their own purposes as well. Tecumseh sought to align divergent voices into a Native Confederacy in order to secure the future of his people on their own terms, but he met with resistance from various tribes that desired to work within the parameters of the American system of treaties. However, the growing conflict between the two white nations provided an opportunity for the Shawnee warrior to advance his own cause towards a united and militarily strong Indian nation.

General Hull understood that the Natives needed the British as much as the British needed the Natives. In a letter to the American Secretary of War, Hull wrote: “The British cannot hold Upper Canada without the assistance of the Indians...The Indians cannot conduct a war without the assistance of a civilized nation.”<sup>21</sup> After the Natives proved incredibly useful in several key battles, including taking Detroit from Hull as Elliot predicted they would, the people of Upper Canada were overjoyed. However, it appears that some were complaining that the use of Natives in battle was unethical due to the viciousness with which they fought. Therefore, men of influence and moral standing were called upon to weigh in on the matter; the Rev. John Strachan was just such a man.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Allan W. Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh*. (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1992), 570.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, *Neighbors*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> William Hull, “Letter to the Secretary of War,” as found in Klinck, *Tecumseh*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Robertson writes the following, “Strachan emerged from the conflict like a triumphant and snorting war-horse reinvigorated by the fumes of gunpowder. At the end of the war, on the nomination of the lieutenant-governor [Francis Gore], he was appointed to the executive council. He had arrived.” Thomas B. Robertson, *The Fighting Bishop: John Strachan—The First Bishop of Toronto and Other Essays in His*



### III. *A Defensible War is a Just War*

Because America attacked during the Napoleonic Wars, effectively joining the French side, John Strachan considered it a traitor to global peace. In a sermon given shortly after the death of Isaac Brock, the minister seemed saddened by America's actions because, "The only nation from which [Britain] might have hoped for kindness, sympathy and gratitude" had chosen to side against England and had "deserted the cause of humanity and joined the tyrant."<sup>23</sup> As the war continued, Strachan became increasingly displeased with the Americans. In 1814, he preached to his congregation:

our neighbours blinded with ambition; and arrogant, from the great wealth and extensive trade which they had acquired by the miseries of Europe; and tempted by views of immediate aggrandizement, became traitors to the peace and happiness of mankind; and anticipating the downfall of the last citadel of liberty, hastened to seize upon a part of her territories. They have been sadly disappointed, and are about to meet with the punishment which their baseness deserves. The same victories which have prostrated the Tyrant of Europe [Napoleon], will prostrate *his Satellites in America.*<sup>24</sup>

This was not simply an example of Strachan's loyalty to the crown, but of his belief that the success of the empire was directly linked to the peace of the world.<sup>25</sup>

To Strachan, the war was justifiable

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*Times* (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers, 1926), 29. Strachan wrote military leaders to give his insights regarding the war and was sure to remind them of his position and offer any service he could to aid them. He wrote to Sir George Prevost to make the following offer: "I beg leave to add that I am ready to exert myself in any way consistent with my Clerical character to contribute towards the defence & security of the Provinces." John Strachan, "Letter to Sir George Prevost, October 1812" *The John Strachan Letter Book, 1812-1834* George W. Spragge (ed.) (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1946), 13. Strachan's days of teaching in Cornwall also added to his power. When he sent a letter to the influential John Richardson explaining the events that had taken place at York, he was sure to explain that the man delivering the letter was of certain importance both to Strachan and the province. He wrote, "This [letter] will be presented to you by my adopted son Mr. John Robinson our temporary Attorney General." To this end it must also be noted that Strachan was responsible for the education of a young man by the name of John Ridout who was the son of the Surveyor General of Upper Canada, a man of "great Respectability" according to Strachan. Letter 25 June 1813, Spragge, *Letter Book*, 40. This is not to impugn the man's integrity or to imply that he only taught children of prominent citizens. There is no evidence that this is the case but it is another example of Strachan's ability to become entrenched in the spheres of influence that existed at the time. He even maneuvered himself into becoming a liaison on military matters. After recommending Lieutenant Colonel Neil McLean of Cornwall and Joseph Anderson to Colonel Nathaniel Coffin, the bishop made the following plea: "may I request to communicate to me the conditions of that approbation and the number of men required to enable them to retain their respective rank, that I may give them early notice for a little time is of the greatest consequence to them in procuring volunteers." John Strachan, "Letter to Col. Coffin," 19 March 1813, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> John Strachan, "Sermon from 3 June 1814," as found in Norma MacRae, *The Religious Foundation of John Strachan's Social and Political Thought as Contained in his Sermons, 1803-1866*. (M.A. Thesis, McMaster University, 1978), 92.

<sup>24</sup> John Strachan, *A Sermon Preached at York, Upper Canada, On the Third of June, Being the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving*. (Montreal: William Gray, 1814), 33. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> While Strachan seems to have written as if the Americans were of one mind on the issue of



*Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames, , 1813, by C.W. Jefferys.*

because America was the aggressor. He wrote in August of 1812, “All defensive wars are just. We were at peace and war

has been declared against us; we have been invaded and attacked, we are consequently acting on the defensive, that is, we

the war, scholarship on the topic shows that this was not so. The United States became divided over this issue and many people were adamantly opposed to fighting at all. New England avoided fighting altogether and even continued to trade with New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. For a fascinating look at this dynamic see John Boileau, *Half-Hearted Enemies: Nova Scotia, New England and the War of 1812*. (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company, 2005). Of particular interest to the topic at hand is the work done on the days of prayer called by American Churches in the summer of 1812. The Massachusetts’ day of prayer was political and accusatory to the motives and dangers Americans faced as they waged this war. The prayers of that day, “pleaded for protection from an alliance with infidel France, *asked justice for the persecuted Indians*, and begged pardon for the country’s many sins.” William Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion*. (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1973), 20 (italics added for emphasis). The American people were divided and many in the spiritual community would have found Strachan’s accusations correct even if they could not side with him officially.

*In 1911, the citizens of Thamesville erected this monument to commemorate both the Battle of the Thames and the spot where Tecumseh met his death. (Courtesy of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 972.275.26m)*

are repelling injury.”<sup>26</sup> He went on to write that Christian soldiers had no cause to fear judgment from the Almighty because:

The very precept, ‘Love Your Enemies,’ presupposes the existence of enemies, and consequently of wars... How can you love those whose destruction you desire, and against whom you are fighting? To this the Christian may answer, that he seeks not the destruction of his enemy, but his return to justice and humanity. The end proposed by all wars is peace; and as soon as this can be obtained on equitable terms by the friend of the Gospel, he wars no longer.<sup>27</sup>

For the Rev. John Strachan, once the nation’s hand had been forced to war it was the duty of each Upper Canadian inhabitant who was loyal to the crown, and who saw the cowardice and vice within the United States, to stand up and fight to support England.

Like Tenskwatawa, Strachan condemned America’s belief that it alone defended human liberty; instead he wrote a vigorous defense of the superiority of England’s system of governance:

Our wise and brave ancestors had judgment to perceive and courage enough to vindicate



the national rights of man; at the same time they generously submitted to the reasonable and high prerogative of supreme executive power... They have succeeded in establishing a Constitution of Government, the wonder and envy of surrounding nations; they have shewn the world that British subjects are free men in the best sense of the word and that rational liberty is no way incompatible with prompt obedience to legitimate authority... we in this remote Province are blessed with an exact epitome of its government, as far as suits our infant state; and enjoy the invaluable privilege [sic] of its mild and equitable laws; which secure to us and our posterity all the civil and religious rights of free born British subjects<sup>28</sup>

His call to arms was designed both

<sup>26</sup> John Strachan, “Letter from 2 August 1812,” *Memoir of the Right Reverend John Strachan* A.N. Bethune (ed.). (Toronto: Henry Rowsell, 1870), 42. He would preach this theme frequently as is evidenced in his sermon to the legislature in York of the same month: “[God] will give us a consolation that our enemy can never enjoy...we have not fought the war but done everything to avoid it.” John Strachan, *A Sermon Preached at York Before the Legislative Council and House of Assembly*. (York: John Cameron, 1812), 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> John Strachan, “A Sermon on Ecclesiasticus 4:3,” as found in MacRae, *Religious Foundation*,

to shame America and to instill in the Upper Canadians a sense of pride in their connection to England. Strachan dismissed Hull's statement that America came to free the people of the province as arrogant,<sup>29</sup> retorting: "They mocked our attachment to the best of kings; and tho' born to the most exalted freedom and independence, they reproached us with being slaves."<sup>30</sup> The Americans were threatening the nation that set people free and dared to call themselves liberators. To Strachan, nothing could be further from the truth.

#### *IV. The Use of Natives in War*

Strachan realized that to defeat the Americans, the British army in Upper Canada needed all the help it could get. He took issue with the "wise acres" that found fault with Brock's use of Natives in

battles because, if he had not, "he & all his men must have perished."<sup>31</sup> Strachan also knew that the Americans were just as eager as the British to employ Natives and, in a letter to the famed abolitionist William Wilberforce defending the use of Natives in battles, Strachan wrote about American hypocrisy and charged that, "These tribes [within our borders] have been solicited & offered bribes by the Americans to desert from us."<sup>32</sup> The American failure to treat the Natives with respect opened up an opportunity for the British to capitalize on the good rapport they had built to win them over to their side of the conflict.<sup>33</sup> Naturally, such strategies present in the early days of the war lent support to the American charge that the British were secretly supplying the Natives with weapons and inciting them to war in the Ohio Valley.<sup>34</sup>

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85. Her note that follows this sermon states that it is not dated but she believes that it was written shortly after the death of Isaac Brock in August 1812.

<sup>29</sup> [America has] threatened with unblushing arrogance to subdue this fine colony." John Strachan, *A Sermon Preached at York, Upper Canada, On the Third of June, Being the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving*. (Montreal: William Gray, 1814), 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> John Strachan, "Letter to John Richardson," 30 September 1812, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> John Strachan, "Letter to Mr. Wilberforce," 1 November 1812, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Strachan's views were also extolled when, in 1819, his brother, James Strachan, visited Upper Canada to see the land that had so captivated his sibling. Despite the completion of the war nearly half a decade earlier he still wrote about the American mistreatment of the Natives and juxtaposed it with the British. He penned the following sentiments that echo the words of his brother from the war times: "The treatment bestowed upon the Indians by the British has been at all times humane, and the greatest deference has been paid to their manners and customs... the United States say in their own praise as to their kind treatment of the Indians, and to give the British government no credit for any thing they have done; but were the matter truly stated, it would be found that the Indians, within the bounds of these States, had been most cruelly.—the very agents of government have cheated them out of the nominal prices given for their lands... the policy of that government, instead of civilizing, is to exterminate the natives; and it has not hesitated, on many occasions, to massacre whole villages. On the contrary, the British government treat them at all times like children, and observe most religiously every stipulation entered into with them." James Strachan, *Visit to Upper Canada*, 134.

<sup>34</sup> Certain members of the British military were also adamant in their desire to see the Natives'

Strachan saw these charges as nothing more than false accusations dreamt up by American leaders to deflect from the truth that they alone were responsible for the Natives' displeasure.<sup>35</sup> He argued that the only reason the Americans were complaining was because their efforts to win the Natives over to their side were proving less fruitful than they had hoped. Their failure, Strachan argued, was because "the Indians have experienced [American] deceptions too often to trust them except in cases of necessity."<sup>36</sup> In defense of the rumoured Native excesses in battle, Strachan simply replied: "When you hear of the cruelty of the Savages, think of the still greater cruelty of the Cabinet at Washington."<sup>37</sup> He charged the Americans with being both deceitful and unabashedly destructive towards these people and he never seemed to waver in his convictions that the Natives were powerful allies who had been treated with great disrespect by those who were now trying to buy their loyalty with more false promises.

Because it speaks to what Strachan regarded as the true motives behind the American invasion, his thoughts on

Native territory are worth noting. Arguing that the tribes were being forced off land that was rightfully theirs, Strachan critiqued "The American Government [because they] neither attend to the feelings or rights of the poor Indians." His letter to Wilberforce defended Native consternation with the republic as just and reasonable based on the principle that "as they are independent they have a right to the privileges of independent nations."<sup>38</sup> In the same letter, he listed eight reasons why the Native people were upset with the Americans and six of those eight dealt with issues related to territory. An example of two of these complaints were:

The Indians...have been at war with the United States for several years, not at the instigation of the British as the American government have falsely reported, but for the following reasons which they publicly assign. 1. Because the Americans drive them from their hunting grounds. 2. Because the American government make fraudulent purchases of their lands from Indians who have no power to sell—one or two insignificant members of a village for example.<sup>39</sup>

Thus were the American policies in the northwestern territories scrutinized

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cause honoured. The following quote was found in a letter belonging to Robert Dickinson: "I think that I have now attained the object I had always in view, that of uniting all the Indian nations... [please help me in] fulfilling the solemn pledges that have been made to the Indians." Letter from Lieut. Duncan Graham as found in letter from Robert Dickinson to William McGillivray, 29 July 1814, Ontario Provincial Archives, Toronto.

<sup>35</sup> John Strachan, "Letter to Mr. Wilberforce," 1 November 1812, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> John Strachan, "Letter to Mr. Wilberforce," 1 November 1812 as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 22.

and deemed to be conniving abuses perpetrated against an autonomous and independent nation. In light of such practices, the invasion of Upper Canada was seen—by Strachan at least—as another step in the process of ridding those territories of their Native inhabitants.

Strachan portrayed his government's treatment of the Native people as another opportunity to laud the superiority of the British system. He adamantly opposed the practice of ranking the value of races because he believed it could lead to un-Christian behaviour. His contempt for such a practice can be seen in the following excerpt from the January 1811 issue of the *Kingston Gazette*:

The moment that we begin to suppose that mankind are composed of distinct species, that moment our most noble and sublime conception of the human race is extinguished. We no longer discover in every individual, whatever be his color or his language, a child of Adam; a brother, a person of the same feelings and of the same natural powers with ourselves, though differently modified by peculiar circumstances and habits, that grand and affecting idea which represents mankind as one family, one blood branching from one primitive stem, is lost... As Christians then we must recognize the copper-colored Indian and the sable Negro...for our brethren.<sup>40</sup>

For Strachan, kinship with Natives was to be built on mutual respect between the races and a shared distrust of America.<sup>41</sup>

Strachan's sentiments, while unique, were not completely alien to an influential segment of Upper Canada's population. James Paxton's article "Merrymaking and Militia Musters: Mohawks, Loyalists, and the (Re)Construction of Community and Identity in Upper Canada"<sup>42</sup> argues convincingly that a "multi-ethnic military community" was birthed in the wake of the American Revolution in Upper Canada. Citing parties, festivals, militia musters, and other social events as ideal breeding grounds for the Native and Loyalist populace to recognize, "a common past, one rooted in their shared experiences of exile and combat" he explains that such shared experiences, "created a usable past that...strengthened bonds of community in the present."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Strachan's concept of the Natives as "brethren" had historic significance to those whose roots were with the United Empire Loyalists.

For these UEL, and their offspring, the shared story of exile and loss in America knit together Natives and whites in ways that transcended racial delineations and embraced a more pragmatic under-

<sup>40</sup> John Strachan, "The Reckoner," *Kingston Gazette*, 22 January 1811, 1. For discussion on this quote and others like it see J.L.H. Henderson (ed.), *John Strachan: Documents and Opinions*. (Toronto-Montreal: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1969), 28.

<sup>41</sup> He also argued that while the Americans boasted of civilizing the Natives they were, in fact, attempting to wipe them out. Writing still to Wilberforce he stated, "and the farce of their civilizing them is the Cant of Mr. Jefferson to gain applause from foreign nations." John Strachan, "Letter to Mr. Wilberforce," 1 November 1812, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Paxton, James W. "Merrymaking and Militia Musters: Mohawks, Loyalists, and the (Re)Construction of Community and Identity in Upper Canada." In *Ontario History*, 102:2 (Autumn 2010), 218-38.

<sup>43</sup> Paxton, "Merrymaking," 218.

standing of community. What was originally defined by exile in the 1790s developed through commerce, entertainment, mutual protection, travel, hospitality,<sup>44</sup> shared festivals, militia musters, dances and even services of worship,<sup>45</sup> into a definable understanding of reciprocity between the Loyalists and the Mohawks. Although by the nineteenth century, such tightly woven communities were strained from government interference, racial and cultural clashes, and the simple fading from memory of the events that originally bound the groups together, what Strachan proposed was not a radical departure but a reminder of a time in the not-so-distant past when Natives and Loyalists found common bonds that united the groups in a kinship. Such a bond was required again in 1812 as the Natives and Loyalists, once more facing exile and destruction at the

hands of the Americans, needed to resurrect such alliances for the mutual benefit and protection of both groups.

### *V. Respect for Native Character*

John Strachan was also impressed by the bravery of Natives and the care they showed for their fellow warriors. In perhaps one of his most profound compliments, he compared the honour shown by the Native chiefs with those of his own beloved English military. He wrote: "Among [the Natives] military merit consists in beating the enemy with little loss. In fine, an Office of Riflemen & an Indian Chief are praised for the same kind of conduct: to repulse the enemy with a severe loss on their own part is disgraceful not meritorious."<sup>46</sup> Strachan commended the conduct displayed by the Natives on the battlefield, especially in light of the grow-

<sup>44</sup> "When journeying from one part of the colony to another, Mohawks and loyalists alike often stayed in the homes of friends and kinsfolk, thus preserving ties between people separated by distance." Paxton, "Merrymaking," 224.

<sup>45</sup> "While the sociability surrounding Sunday services helped knit together the local community, it also connected Grand River Mohawks and loyalists to kinsfolk at Niagara...Infrequent visits made [Anglican Reverend] Addison's arrival eventful, especially as he doubtless brought news from Niagara, carried messages, and reported on distant friends and family." Paxton, "Merrymaking," 229. Also, "the church [St. Paul's at Grand River] attracted parishioners from among Mohawks and local loyalists. Church membership, therefore, roughly reflected the composition of the Grand River's multi-ethnic community." Paxton, "Merrymaking," 228.

<sup>46</sup> John Strachan, "Life of Col Bishoppe," December 1813, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 6. It should also be noted that the more vehement comments regarding the American military were reserved for late in 1813 to 1814. While Strachan does not mention a reason for this, it is safe to posit that the capture of York and the reversal the British Navy faced on Lake Erie caused him some concern that the American military effort might prove successful. Therefore, condemnations of their strategies and character would gain new impetus and strength. There is little evidence that Americans threw themselves into military engagements with the British with little regard for their own numbers, mostly because they never had sufficient numbers to pursue such a strategy.

<sup>47</sup> Strachan was not alone in his contempt for the leadership of Prevost. In *A Wampum Denied*, Sandy Antal specifically links the following remark to Strachan's views of the Natives: "contemporary British observers in Upper Canada were overwhelming in their agreement with the view expressed by Rector John Strachan, who wrote, 'The matter of employing the Indians is not a question of policy but one of absolute necessity.'" Antal, *Wampum*, 23-4. Quoting Strachan to Wilberforce, 1 Nov 1812. Spragge, *Letter Book*, 23.

ing contempt he possessed for the vacillating leadership of General Prevost.<sup>47</sup>

Brock had utilized the Natives well and they had proven to be beneficial to the cause, if somewhat unreliable. However, according to Strachan, Colonel Bishoppe understood how to best utilize the Native skills of war. It was not prudent for the British people to attempt to force the Natives to fight as the British fought; that would be a poor use of their skills. Instead, Strachan argued, they should be allowed to fight as they pleased as long as the British leaders could channel their skills to a common goal. In "Life of Col. Bishoppe" Strachan argued for this,

[Natives] are a fierce and independent people, incapable of submitting to controul [sic]: they are easily led but will never be driven. He, that desires to profit by their services, will study their inclinations, and by seasonable encouragement & heading them in their expeditions with a few whites, he will render them most efficient on the wings of his army. They are at all times terrible to the enemy and beyond measure after a defeat. Col: Bishoppe knew well how to turn these sons of nature to the best advantage: not by changing their mode of fighting, or assuming authority over them; but by reaping benefit from their incessant activity<sup>48</sup>

If the leadership would allow the Natives to maintain their way of life and military

traits the British would find themselves with a most grateful, and skillful, military ally.

## *VI. The Real Reason for the War*

Early into the war, John Strachan agreed with the military assessment that the Americans were desirous of land and were determined to take Upper and Lower Canada for their own. However, by November of 1812, Strachan believed that a far more sinister plan was in motion. The following is an excerpt from a letter written to the Marquis Wellesley:

It will perhaps surprise your Lordship but it is nevertheless true, that the Great object of the United States at present is to take Upper Canada in preference to Lower Canada. This Province is of much greater importance to them. Possessed of Upper Canada the Indians are entirely at their mercy for not being able to procure supplies they must submit I know that it is commonly said that so long as we keep possession of Quebec Upper Canada is of no use to the United States but this is a great mistake<sup>49</sup>

To Strachan, the war was not about British territory at all; it was about the Natives. One of the more controversial positions he espoused was that the motives cited by the American government for the war were, "popular baits,"<sup>50</sup> de-

<sup>48</sup> John Strachan, "Life of Col Bishoppe," December 1813, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> John Strachan, "Letter to The Marquis Wellesley," 1 November 1812, as found in Spragge, *Letter Book*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> "My leading ideas are that the conquest of the Canadas, particularly Upper Canada, is with the enemy the true cause of the war, in order to dissolve our connection with the Indians; that the other causes alleged are mere popular baits; that the forbearance persisted in by us in these provinces, and especially on the sea-coast has been and continues to be most pernicious..." John Strachan, *John Strachan: Documents and Opinions*. J.L.H. Henderson (ed.), (Toronto-Montreal: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1969), 45.



signed to hide the true reasons from the British people. Strachan condemned Prevost for his timidity and an unwillingness to act aggressively towards the Americans. Although Prevost's plan to hold Lower Canada so that America could not advance made sense strategically, Strachan argued that the American goal had always been Upper Canada and to only guard the Lower Province played directly into their hands. Strachan offered his reasons for disagreeing with Prevost in a letter to James McGill:

General Prevost has not certainly so high an opinion of the value of this Province as our Enemies—he thinks perhaps that they cannot keep it as long as he remains in possession of Quebec... But our enemies do not covet the Lower Province because they would be forced to give it up to the French who are ready to demand it. And even should Great Britain refuse to make any peace till this country was restored, still a couple of years possession would answer the policy of our enemies—in that time they would alienate from us all the Indians & reduce them to a state of subjection, and they would oppress & destroy all the Loyalists.<sup>51</sup>

For Strachan, the Indian issue was more than just a matter of some importance in the war; it was the entire reason for the war!

In that same letter to James McGill, John Strachan argued that as long as the

Native tribes of the Ohio Valley remained strong the Americans could not expand to the west. Since the western frontier was so massive, it would be impossible to hunt all the Natives down and kill them. However, with the Natives contained in a smaller space, like Upper Canada for example, the Americans had an opportunity to wipe them out and, in so doing, open the west up to their people.<sup>52</sup> Strachan wrote:

Nor can it be concealed that the importance of [Upper Canada to the United States] is incalculable—the possession of it would give them the complete command of the Indians who must either submit or starve within two years and thus leave all the Western frontier clear & unmolested. The Americans are systematically employed in exterminating the Savages, but they can never succeed while we keep possession of this country. This my Dear Sir is *the true cause of this war*, & so long as there is any prospect of conquering us the war will continue.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Strachan's compassion for the Natives, his disdain for the Americans, and his anger at the timidity of leaders such as Prevost each found significance in his disbelief in the political reasons for the war that Madison cited in June of 1812. For Strachan, greedy Americans were fighting to eradicate a threat to their nation's expansion. For him, the War of 1812 was about stopping the systematic

<sup>51</sup> John, Strachan, "Letter to James McGill," November 1812, Spragge, *Letter Book*, 26.

<sup>52</sup> "Prevost was correct in anticipating minimal support from England. Furthermore, Brock's strategy for aggressive action in the west ran contrary to the views of the previous governor, Sir James Craig, who advocated a stout defence from Quebec City." This, Strachan argued, was playing into the hands of the American military goals to annex Upper Canada, decimate the Native population and then be free to expand westward. Antal, *Wampum*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> John, Strachan, "Letter to James McGill," November 1812, Spragge, *Letter Book*, 25.

*A photo taken in 1882 of three surviving Six Nations warriors who had fought in the War of 1812. (Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada).*



extermination of people that, he believed, were allies of the British Empire and, more importantly, fellow children of God.<sup>54</sup>

This view was not a popular one, and even Strachan did not repeat it after 1812. For this reason it would be easy to dismiss it as wartime fancy. However, Strachan's desire to defend both the Native people and Upper Canada formed the backdrop for many of his later writings and teachings about the war. The justness of Upper Canada and the divine

nature of the British Empire balanced, in his mind, any concern for the reputed excesses of Natives in combat. In other words: Britain's right made the Native might permissible. Strachan's letters and sermons are a wealth of information regarding this period and to dismiss the man's beliefs because they were not oft-

<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to simplify the causes of something as complex as a war into one, or even several, motives. However, John Strachan's opinion of the American desire to eradicate the Indians was not heavily supported in the writing of the time, nor in the academic community. Historian Louis Hacker does agree that the Americans were less than forthcoming with the true reasons for their attack on Upper Canada. However, he thought that it was Canadian, and not western, land that whetted the American appetite. He writes: "While some Westerners no doubt advocated the conquest of Canada so that their British rivals would be driven from the fur trade with the Indians, the chief preoccupation...must have been with those vistas of boundless Canadian lands." Louis M. Hacker, "The Desire for Canadian Land," *The Causes of the War of 1812: National Honor or National Interest?* Bradford Perkins (ed.). (New York-Toronto: Holt, Reinhart, Winston, 1962), 50. Hacker makes the argument that the American west was not desirable land at this time because the settlers lacked the technology to make the vast prairie-land viable. Therefore, while expansion may have been their goal, the direction they desired to go was north and not west. On the other hand, Julius Pratt argues that since many Americans made no bones about using the war to rid the fur trade of British traders, it is unlikely they would conceal their desire for land as if it were more sinister. He writes, "Was it more wicked, and hence more to be concealed, to covet Canadian lands than to covet the profits from Canadian furs? Yet the fur trade again and again creeps into war speeches and war articles." Reginald Horsman, "The Conquest of Canada a Tactical Objective," *The Causes of the War of 1812*, 55. Pratt argues that it was the fear of Indians and the even deeper anger that the British were spurring them on that is easier to prove through primary sources and logical reasoning.

repeated somewhat impoverishes any study of this period.

### *Conclusion*

This article has sought to show that the Rev. John Strachan's opinions of the Native people early in the war were not only politically and strategically sound, but also theologically strong and compassionate. As the invasion of Upper Canada commenced, Strachan understood that the province, so far removed from its benefactor, was in real danger of being co-opted into the United States and that the anger and distrust that some Native tribes felt towards America, coupled with their skills at war, could be used to strengthen the British position. He comforted those who thought that a civilized nation like Britain should not use "uncivilized savages" by reminding them that British influence could help moderate excesses. The US government, he felt, was so morally inferior to England—a point proven by its treatment of the Natives—it needed to be defeated in order to insure the peace. Therefore, he

did not entertain any notion of peace with the Americans and, once war was joined, counseled military action against them. He wrote about his admiration for the character of the Native people, advocating for them because they, like the Upper Canadians, were inhabitants of independent nations that were being invaded by American settlers. Strachan was proud that the Natives had, out of respect for the crown, chosen Britain as their ally, and he accredited that to the Christian nature of the empire.

Though John Strachan may not have written a lot about the Natives after 1812, people at high levels read his writings. His words were filled with compassion for a people he felt had been abused, exploited, dismissed as inferior, and threatened with extermination. It would be too much to say that Strachan's opinions of the Natives in 1812 defined his later views regarding the war but this article has sought to show that, for a while at least, the Indian issue was one that the Rev. John Strachan saw as central to the survival of Upper Canada.

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