

Tecumseh's Bones By Guy St-Denis

William Campbell

Volume 97, Number 2, Fall 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065885ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065885ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, W. (2005). Review of [*Tecumseh's Bones* By Guy St-Denis]. *Ontario History*, 97(2), 227–228. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065885ar>

Tecumseh's Bones

By Guy St-Denis. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. xviii + 286 pp. Illustrations. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7735-2843-1.

A few months ago I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to inspect a pocket watch and decorative breastplate at the Royal Ontario Museum that belonged to the legendary Native American leader, Tecumseh. Although completely unaware of the *story* that accompanied the items, it did not restrict my imagination, and I later took creative liberties while describing their historical significance to a few curious listeners I managed to corner.

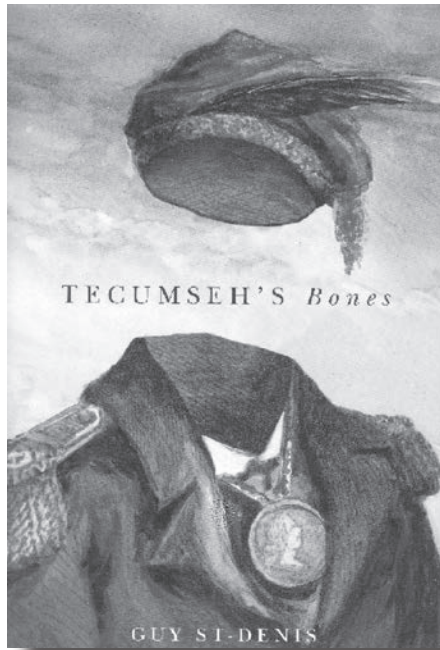
Guy St-Denis appears to draw similar conclusions regarding historical recollections in his monograph *Tecumseh's Bones* while mapping the complex array of stories associated with the mysterious resting place of the great chief's remains. After tracing the seemingly encrypted web of tales and clues that span 150 years and eight chapters, St-Denis surmises that the oral histories and evidence cited by both Native Americans and 'white admirers' who sought to solve the riddle were all significantly flawed. In the end, the author deduces that the bones were most likely unknowingly plowed up by a Thamesville farmer named James Dickson in the 1840s, and probably reburied or partially given away as souvenirs.

Tecumseh's Bones neatly includes all the components of a great mystery: the prophetic foretelling of death, tales of a secret burial, vows of silence, and a plethora of 'treasure' hunters. Unlike historical fiction, however, St-Denis' story is diligently referenced (the footnotes constituting over one third of the 286 pages) and vigorously researched. Furthermore, the text is followed by a twenty-one-page chronology of key events helpful in digesting the multiple

layers of interconnectedness relevant to the subject. The monograph offers professional and amateur academics a glimpse into nineteenth-century regional life in southern Ontario, and touches upon themes of indigenous and Eurocanadian identity, and how history is shaped and remembered.

The debates that flared over the construction of a Tecumseh monument (or monuments) and exploration and excavation

of Native remains, however, could have easily been drawn into a wider narrative. The author clearly documents the influence of the Department of Indian Affairs, the Ontario government, town councils, self interest groups, academics, and curious individuals in the evolution of



how Tecumseh's legacy was remembered, manipulated, and constructed to suit specific purposes at specific times. These findings offer valuable insight into history of memory, and parallels could have been made to such current literature as Daniel Francis' *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* or *How Societies Remember*, edited by Paul Connerton. In addition, further commentary regarding government and private involvement in the unrestricted excavation of Indian burial grounds would have rounded the study, shedding further light on the attitudes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century "civilized" society, as the Kennewick Man case did in the United States. In his deconstruction of the 'myths and tales,' St-Denis' own ahistorical nihilism overlooks many of these attractive themes, and *Tecumseh's Bones* begs to be

further contextualized.

These criticisms aside, the work is an excellent example of the fruits that can be had as a result of relentless archival digging and researching. The primary purpose of the monograph was not an exercise in historiography, but rather to evaluate and comment on the mysterious whereabouts of Tecumseh's bones – a task not easily handled – and St-Denis appears to have provided the most probable answer.

William Campbell
McMaster University

Bibliography:

- Connerton, Paul, ed. *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
Francis, Daniel. *National Dreams: Myth, memory and Canadian history* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997).

Michael Power:

the Struggle to Build the Catholic Church on the Canadian Frontier.

By Mark G. McGowan. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. xvii + 382 pp. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7735-2914-4.

On 1 October 1847 Michael Power, the first Catholic bishop of Toronto, died of typhus in his adopted city. He was laid to rest in the crypt of the partially-built cathedral named in honour of his patron saint, Michael. In that same year more than one thousand famine Irish also died of typhus and other diseases in the city, and Bishop Power is thought to have been infected while personally ministering to the dying in the municipal fever sheds. He had been the leader of the newly-established Catholic diocese of Toronto for little more than

five years and, like the unfinished edifice of the cathedral, his plans for the diocese were in an early stage of fruition. Viewed as a Famine martyr, Michael Power's episcopacy has attracted the attention of many writers in the past, but this biography is by far the most complete. In this extensive work, officially commissioned by the archdiocese of Toronto, McGowan has successfully identified and drawn upon neglected archival records in Canada, Ireland, Britain, France, and Rome, and in the process he has filled many gaps in the life of a prelate who was hitherto more