

## *A Picturesque Situation: Mackinac before Photography, 1615-1860* By Brian Leigh Dunnigan

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# Book Reviews

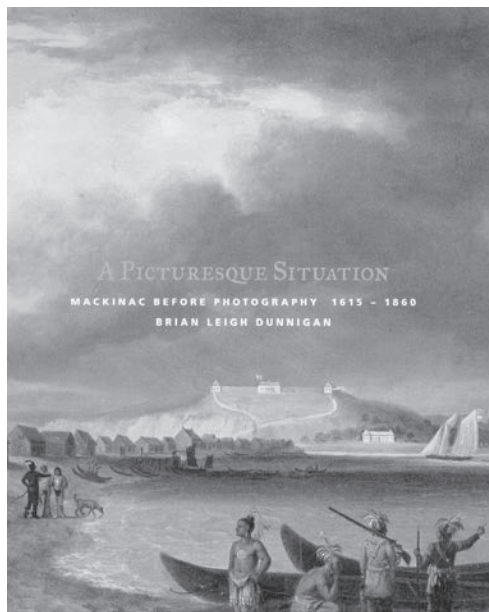
## Spring 2009

### *A Picturesque Situation: Mackinac before Photography, 1615-1860*

By Brian Leigh Dunnigan

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008. xii + 394 pages. \$US75.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-8143-3214-6. (<http://wsupress.wayne.edu>)

The area around the Straits of Mackinac, where lakes Michigan and Huron meet, was one of the key strategic points in Great Lakes history. It funnelled or choked movement through the region, it attracted people who wanted to meet and trade, and it served as a base from which power could be projected across extensive distances. Early in the War of 1812, for instance, the British captured the American fort on Mackinac Island; then in 1814 they defended it against a U.S. attempt to retake the post. From Mackinac, the king's officers sent supplies, men, and other assistance to the First Nations of the upper Mississippi. The Aboriginal peoples in turn controlled a good portion of the Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri territories against the Americans, despite the collapse of the better-known western tribal confederacy to the east of them after the battles of Lake Erie and Moraviantown in 1813. The British were able to exploit Mackinac's potential even after the loss of Lake Erie because it could be supplied – with some difficulty – from Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River along ancient trade routes that used the Toronto



Passage, the Ottawa River, and connecting waterways to gain access to Georgian Bay and Lake Huron.

Brian Dunnigan has worked in the public history field for several decades, and currently is the head of research and publications as well as curator of maps at the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In *A Picturesque Situation: Mackinac before Photography* he explores the story of this important location from the first stirrings of European consciousness of the straits in the early 1600s to the eve of the American Civil War 250 years later. He does so primarily through an examination of period maps, plans, prints, watercolours, and paintings in combination with an engaging narrative survey, supported by such additional materials as lists of garrison commandants,

a register of written descriptions of Mackinac, and an inventory of known illustrations of the site before the mid-1800s. Images are presented in colour with first-rate cataloguing data in an intelligently-designed, large-format volume (although anyone wishing to read the detailed period notes on some plans might need a magnifying glass). The net result is an outstanding book on the transformations that affected Mackinac's colonial and early national periods when Aboriginal, French, British, Canadian, and American people layered and re-layered themselves over the evolving site.

While one hopes that readers will not neglect the solid interpretive texts in the book, the most obvious draw of *A Picturesque Situation* is the collection of images. Yet, these are, as the author writes, "entirely subjective," with the result that "errors, lies, omissions, or distortions can be transmitted as easily through maps and drawings as by words." (p. x) Nevertheless, even entirely false illustrations tell us about their creators and their creators' agendas, while, of course, most visual documents (like most written texts) have more straightforward value after proper analysis of their comparative strengths and weaknesses.

For example, one of the apparently less promising (although more attractive) images in the book is an 1820s oil painting, *Tigress and Scorpion carried into Mackinac*, by William Dashwood (p. 115), which depicts the arrival of two captured U.S. Navy schooners at the post in 1814. Problematically, some First Nations individuals seem to have wandered into the foreground from other artworks, such as a woman from George Heriot's 1807 print, *Domociliated Indians of Canada*. The overall landscape is a copy of a reliable print from 1812, *Michilimackinac on Lake Huron*, by Richard Dillon Jr. and engraved by Thomas Hall (p. 107). Consequently, one might question the value of Dashwood's effort, given the inaccuracy of including Aboriginal

people from other times and places and the existence of a better view of the landscape. Yet, *Tigress and Scorpion* does have merit. It had been commissioned by Robert McDouall of the Glengarry Light Infantry, the post's commandant in 1814-15, who had had the artist record details about the schooners that align with data in other sources, thus allowing the other records and the image to confirm each other. Furthermore, Dashwood's oil is generally clearer than Hall's engraving, giving it additional confirmatory importance. As well, Dashwood's image captures the commandant's memory of one of Mackinac's main wartime events. With such close collaboration between artist and veteran, the finished work is, in Dunnigan's words, "the visual equivalent of oral history." (p. 117) Dashwood's image is only moderately useful in providing information unavailable elsewhere, but it is still more evocative than the print. We ought to recognize that impressions, even modest ones, are valuable, especially when based on credible eye-witness sources. Most of the images chosen by Dunnigan, however, possess straightforward and obvious historical utility, and can be understood without as much of an assessment as Dashwood's painting requires.

Dunnigan possesses one of the best curatorial minds we have today when it comes to using documentary art, maps, plans, and artefacts for understanding the history of the Great Lakes region. *A Picturesque Situation* is both a solid history and a delightful tour of a significant location, and at \$75.00, this huge volume is a bargain. Beyond its merit for examining a particular region's past, Dunnigan invites readers to consider how visual records can be used effectively in the larger quest for scholarly understanding while offering insights on how we can utilize such sources with confidence.

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