

The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock by Guy St. Denis

Michael Borsk

Volume 112, numéro 1, spring 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069013ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069013ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Borsk, M. (2020). Compte rendu de [*The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock* by Guy St. Denis]. *Ontario History*, 112(1), 106–108. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069013ar>

Erie. In 1870, the steam tug was sold to James Valentine, of Detroit, who intended to refit it as a passenger steamer. Unfortunately, it caught fire and was a complete wreck.

The steamer had its share of running aground, and mechanical breakdowns. Significant damage was usually repaired in Detroit, or parts were sent from there, or Buffalo, to Collingwood. This speaks to the Americans having the necessary ship repair facilities on the Great Lakes, ahead of Canada. Carter notes that steamers competed with the steam train for providing service to communities around the lakes. In some places, trains replaced ship travel and in others ships helped to advance the rail lines (by carrying cargo for railway construction).

Carter's sources include a wide swath of contemporary newspaper articles and shipping news items, as well as account books, private letters, and diaries, along with secondary sources. The resulting bibliography for this volume is worth the price itself. Images are spread throughout the book, most dealing with the Park fam-

ily, or the *Ploughboy*. The cover is a particularly gripping image of the events off Lonely Island. Three appendixes give list of vessels owned by the Parks, a timeline for the *Ploughboy*, and two images related to the Park family. The first two appendixes are useful, the third seems unnecessary.

There is a spacing problem on pages 16 and 17, where the text ends a third of the way down the first, resuming on the next, leaving an empty gap. The second is the verbatim repetition of the information about registration of the *Ploughboy* with the *British Registry of Shipping Inland Waters* and its valuation, see pages 12 and 17. These are small problems that ultimately do not detract from the solid research and the fine story of this steamer's career on the Great Lakes.

This book would be of interest to those studying the merchant trade on the lakes, steamship development and career, and the mid-nineteenth-century history of Canada West.

Thomas Malcomson
Independent Scholar, Toronto

The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock

By Guy St. Denis

Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2018. 280 Pages. \$34.99.

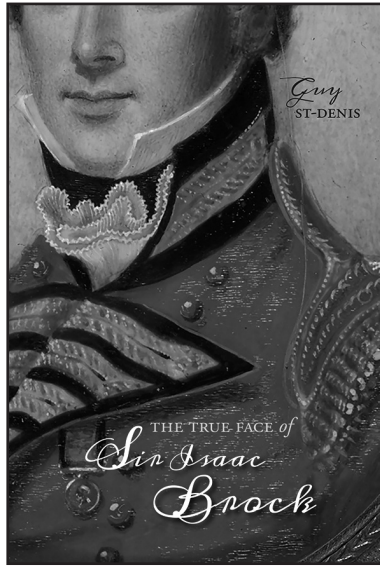
ISBN 9781773850207. (www.press.ucalgary.ca)

Was Sir Isaac Brock a good-looking man? Far from a flippant question, Guy St. Denis' *The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock* reveal how accounts of Brock's appearance formed just one thread in the search for an authentic image of the famed hero of Upper Canada. Scouring archival collections across the Great Lakes and the Atlantic, consulting with experts across disciplines, and leaving

no footnote unexamined, St. Denis covers the forgotten controversy over the provenance of Brock's portrait.

St. Denis begins his investigation in 1880, with the search of Lieutenant Governor John Beverley Robinson for a portrait of Brock. In 1896, Agnes FitzGibbon and Sara Mickle, two founding members of the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto, settled upon a rival miniature

as the true face of Brock. With his two sides set, St. Denis explores how their competing claims to which was the real portrait of Brock played out. Drawing on their own personal ambition and patriotic notions, FitzGibbon and Mickle leaned on the opinions and traditions of the Brock family in Guernsey, art historians, gallery curators, and any other individuals with an interest in Brock's life and legacy to make their case. Together, all of these



voices obscured Brock's face by the turn of the century. Sorting out this confusion began in earnest during the 1970s with the work of a librarian at the Canadian War Museum, Ludwig Koche, and capped off with St. Denis' own investigation of the provenance of Brock's image. From his research, St. Denis is able to undoubtedly conclude, "the true face of Sir Isaac Brock was finally revealed in the profile portrait by Gerrit Schipper" (167).

What St. Denis calls the "heroic iconography" surrounding Brock is undoubtedly the focus of this history and thirty-one colour plates beautifully illustrate his subject matter (1). But his search to authenticate Brock's portrait reads as an ongoing reflection on the practice of writing history. When Ferdinand Brock Tupper published his biography of his uncle, he included a footnote that his family "possessed no good likeness of the general" to suggest that there was no portrait of Brock at all, a claim that St. Denis reveals he also made when asked directly (14-15, 138). Of course, this was a deliberate mischaracterization of the original source, one that

traded on the weight of the authority that came from family ties (61). Thanks in part to Mickle's use of this errant footnote to advance her own claims for her miniature's authenticity, Brock's likeness was shrouded in doubt for over half a century (102). By correcting this and other research errors, as well as integrating the practices and tools from art history and restoration, St. Denis leaves very little to safe assumption and is rewarded for his ef-

fort (89, 130).

As he recounts the search for an authentic portrait of Brock, St. Denis sketches out the divide between those working inside and outside the university. Heavily influenced by Carl Berger's *The Writing of Canadian History*, St. Denis situates the contest over Brock's likeness within the professionalization of history in Anglo-Canadian institutions during the late nineteenth century. In his defense of Pierre Berton's 1980 work on the War of 1812, St. Denis concludes, "Berton was simply filling a void left by academic historians themselves" (4). While it is strange to see Brock referred to as a "marginalized great man," particularly given the explosion of Brock imagery related to the centenary commemorations of the War of 1812, St. Denis ably reveals how tensions around who had a claim to the historical past contributed to the uncertainty over Brock's likeness.¹ Before publishing, Koche actively shielded his work from professional historians, "who he regarded as being overly critical of antiquarian pursuits" and Mickle's alleged portrait of Brock drew the ire of an

anonymous commentator, whose skeptical letter was published in the press under the alias, “Historian” (110, 31). Historical arguments shaped and exchanged in private letters and historical societies, rather than at university conferences or in peer-reviewed journals, form a fascinating part of St. Denis’ argument as they highlight how this fragmented diffusion of historical knowledge created confusion.

Yet, despite the explanatory weight given to how this tension between the historian and the “historically minded” contributed to the lack of certainty about Brock’s true face, there is virtually no engagement with the larger literature on the historical societies and historical commemorations that produced historical knowledge in Canada (21). In recent years, the field of historical memory has flourished in history departments, crossing disciplinary boundaries and moving beyond the walls of academia in the process. What are we to make of St. Denis’ comparison of Mickle’s views on Brock’s portraits as too influenced by her “subjective” agenda and Koche’s work as that of an “honest historian” (108, 111)? Though St. Denis skirts an endorsement of any objective knowledge about the past, he comes too close not to delve into a discussion of the history of historical knowledge production in Ontario.

Certainly, the bolstering that St. Denis gives to the knowledge of local historical societies and to scholars working outside the historical profession is rightly deserved. But it likewise warrants further

contextualization within the wider histories of local heritage and commemorations than St. Denis gives, especially with respect to the activities of the Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Toronto (63). Indeed, if we’re to be critical of what was lost as professional historians moved away from the Victorian era’s “antiquarian pursuits and connoisseurship” towards a social history, “[f]avouring the people over their leaders,” a more balanced evaluation of what was gained in that historiographical shift is necessary (4). Works like Cecilia Morgan’s *Creating Colonial Pasts* or H.V. Nelles’ study on another great man in Canadian history, Samuel de Champlain, are examples of how the local and antiquarian dimensions of national historiographies can be considered together.² But that path is ultimately not taken by St. Denis.

St. Denis’ book is a convincing argument for the value of an historical scholarship that is grounded in rigorous archival practice and extends beyond the knowledge of professional historians. Its accessibility and style ensure this book will be of interest to a popular audience as well as those scholars interested in gritty details of historical commemorations, even as it neglects the necessary historiographical engagements. Thanks to his rigorous sleuthing, St. Denis provides what is sure to be the definitive account of not only the true, but also the false, faces of Sir Isaac Brock.

Michael Borsk
Queen’s University

¹ Though the Canadian Government’s official War of 1812 Website, www.1812.gc.ca, is now defunct, Brock, with the proper portrait, is one of the four “Key Canadian Personalities” on the Canadian War Museum’s 1812: Virtual Exhibition, <<https://www.warmuseum.ca/war-of-1812/explore-history/the-canadian-war/key-canadian-personalities/>>

² Cecilia Morgan, *Creating Colonial Pasts: History, Memory, and Commemoration in Southern Ontario, 1860-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec’s Tercentenary*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).