

TECUMSEH AND THE PROPHET: THE SHAWNEE BROTHERS WHO DEFIED A NATION

(PETER COZZENS)

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I have always been aware of the great Shawnee Indian war chief Tecumseh. I grew up within walking distance of the site of his confederacy's defeat, by William Henry Harrison at the Battle of Tippecanoe, and often visited the battlefield as a child. Tecumseh himself wasn't at the battle; he was far away, trying to raise Indian allies. The battle was instead lost by his inconstant brother, Tenskwatawa, known as the Prophet, with whom Tecumseh had a fraught, but close, relationship. In this book, Peter Cozzens expertly and evocatively traces the lives of these once-famous brothers, the last of the eastern woodlands Indians of North America to mount an effective challenge to the expanding United States.

Cozzens, though the author of many books, is best known for an outstanding 2016 work on the Indian Wars in the West, *The Earth is Weeping*. That book, focused on the nineteenth century, did not cover the defeats of the eastern Indians. Here Cozzens turns to the earlier period, roughly 1750 to 1820, in which the Indians of the Ohio Valley lost their lands. Before 1750 the Europeans had already broken the power of the Six Nations (of whom the Iroquois are the best known), thereby consolidating control over the Eastern Seaboard. British, and soon enough American, settlers kept pushing west, despite promises made to the Indians, and the resulting conflicts are the topic of this book.

Tecumseh was born in 1768 into a division of the larger Shawnee tribe. The Shawnee were an Algonquin tribe—Indian ethnography is complex, but the two major groupings of North American eastern woodlands Indians were the Algonquin and the Iroquois, who, broadly speaking, were ancient enemies. The Shawnee were then resident in southern Ohio (where my grandparents lived, and I often visited Shawnee State Park with them, giving me more childhood doses of Tecumseh). They had not been in Ohio for long; Shawnees were peripatetic, in their culture and as the result of decades of attacks from the Iroquoian tribes. The French and Indian War, that is, the Seven Years War, had ended in 1763, with the British defeating the French and taking Canada. The Shawnee

did not participate in that conflict, in which the Six Nations did actively participate. This was the first major involvement of the Indians in the wars of the Europeans. The core Indian interest was to maintain their own lands, something that, in retrospect, was always doomed to fail. After that big war, small Indian wars continued off and on, notably Pontiac's War, which ended in 1766.

All the Indian wars followed the same basic pattern. The government, whether the Crown or later the United States, would promise or agree to a boundary line, beyond which white settlement would not be allowed and the Indians could lead their traditional lives. White men would ignore this—some combination of, as Cozzens says, “hard-scrabble farmers in search of better land, fugitives from justice, and the congenitally restless of slack moral fiber.” The Indians would become fed up and slaughter dozens or hundreds of white men, women, and children, often in the most gruesome ways. (Daniel Boone's sixteen-year-old son was captured and tortured to death, for example.) The white man would react by organizing punitive military expeditions to kill Indians, in usually, but not always, somewhat less gruesome ways, and drive the Indians off the land.

If there is a crucial fact about the Indian Wars, and in general the relationship between Indians and Europeans, it is that the North American Indian population was shockingly low, and always had been. When Tecumseh was born, a mere fifteen hundred Shawnees claimed most of what is now the southern half of Ohio. True, disease had earlier decimated many of the tribes (although the idea that the Europeans deliberately gave them smallpox is probably a myth—no matter, they got that, and other diseases, anyway; Tecumseh himself survived smallpox), and we don't know how many Indians there were before the Europeans arrived. But likely not that many more than later—the eastern Indians were primarily hunter-gatherers, and the land simply didn't support huge numbers, as can be seen by frequent references to game totally disappearing, and starvation looming, when any sizeable group of Indians gathered for even a few weeks. This problem was exacerbated by white overhunting in the borderlands, and by the fur and skin trade—as Cozzens notes, Indians began to kill just to have something to trade for alcohol, of which more later. Even at the height of their power, in the mid-seventeenth century, the Iroquoian Confederacy, aggressively

expansionist and ruling over a vast area of what is today northeast and upper-midwest America, totaled no more than 50,000 people. Cozzens estimates that the total Indian population of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley in 1768 was approximately 60,000—at the same time the thirteen British colonies had two million inhabitants. Moreover, the Indians, resource poor, deliberately kept their birth rate low (though they did not practice infanticide). Thus, they could never have hoped to compete with the white man in numbers.

Even with their small numbers, the Indians mostly competently played a losing hand. Their only real possible move was to involve themselves in the wars among the French, British, and Americans—the Long Knives, as the Algonquins called the last—and hope to side with the winning team, with the expectation they would then be left in peace. Thus, despite no real interest in the white man's wars, they were inevitably forced by circumstance to join. That, man-for-man, Indians were far better warriors than the whites, and they were quick to adopt European technology, could not compensate for their small numbers and democratic method of fighting, "every man his own chief." Indians often won battles when allied with regular European troops, or alone when fighting poorly trained troops, but usually lost against any sizeable European force that maintained order.

Tecumseh's father died in 1774, when Tecumseh was five, at the Battle of Point Pleasant, in what is now West Virginia. This was one of numerous skirmishes in Dunmore's War, a brief but brutal war caused, predictably, by Virginians pushing west. The British then formally set the Ohio River as the boundary of the Indian lands. This boundary was a key fact of Tecumseh's childhood, and its inevitable breaching by the white man the ground of his life's work. His early years were spent near today's Chillicothe; Cozzens does an excellent job of sketching the culture of the Shawnee, which we will discuss later.

The years of Tecumseh's youth and early adulthood involved the further splintering of the Shawnee, some of whom moved west, and the grinding advance of the white man, sometimes in arms, but more often with a toxic joint offering of alcohol to dull the Indians and money to bribe tribal chiefs to sell land for a tiny fraction of its true worth. In 1782 the uneasy peace ended. In the Gnadenhutten Massacre, Pennsylvania militia, responding to Indian raids, killed nearly a hundred Delawares,

men, women, and children (who were completely uninvolved in the raids, and in fact were farming Christians). The Shawnees and other Algonquins went on the warpath, killing hundreds of white settlers, and fighting pitched battles. At the Battle of Blue Licks, in what is today Kentucky (and is considered one of the last battles of the Revolutionary War), they (along with their allies and some British rangers), killed sixty-seven Kentucky militia. (Among those were another son of Daniel Boone; no wonder Boone wasn't a big fan of the Indians. But then, who even knows today who Daniel Boone was?) George Rogers Clark, a regular army officer in charge of the Kentucky militia, responded with organized expeditions that pushed the Shawnee out of southern Ohio, which was promptly overrun with American settlers.

Tecumseh moved north too, although as a young, unattached warrior he ranged widely, and he participated in various skirmishes and fights, as well as piracy against Ohio River settler flatboats. But fewer than a thousand Shawnee remained east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio. The rest moved to Missouri, or to Creek country in the south, or to join the Chickamaugas who lived on the Tennessee River, near today's Chattanooga. For a while, Tecumseh, and his brothers, visited Louisiana, then Tennessee. He eventually returned to the Ohio Valley, however, and took part in the crushing 1791 defeat of Arthur St. Clair's chaotic expedition against the Ohio Indians, which, in the usual pattern, was followed a few years later, in 1794, by "Mad Anthony" Wayne's destruction of a large group of Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, where Tecumseh also fought. Tecumseh gradually raised his profile and attracted followers, mostly aggressive young men and those who wanted to maintain the traditional Indian life, as many of the tribes became less warlike and dependent on annuities and other handouts. He and his extended family moved to today's eastern Indiana, maintaining reasonably good relations with the local whites (helped by that Tecumseh spoke some English).

Some years passed, and the Indians south of the Great Lakes continued their slow decline. Harsh winters, vanishing game, American pressure, and alcoholism told on them. Then Tenskwatawa, Tecumseh's younger brother, regarded as a useless, drunk buffoon (he had shot his own eye out as a child), suddenly claimed to have received a series of visions giving him divine revelation. He informed their small Shawnee

village that the Great Spirit had told him that to gain heaven Indians must give up alcohol, and all the white man's ways, and from this base he developed a new syncretic religious doctrine, with bits and pieces of earlier Indian mysticisms, Christianity, and Shawnee culture.

Tenskwatawa's religion was only the latest in a series of Indian religious revivals. A Delaware, Neolin, had preached a similar set of doctrines in the 1760s, which was adopted in part by the Ottawa war chief Pontiac to fuel his eponymous war. In the Prophet's doctrine, there were two opponents: Americans and witches. As far as Americans, however, Tenskwatawa's doctrine wasn't militaristic, but particularistic. Despite American fears, he did not, at first, preach going on the warpath. As far as witches, Cozzens frequently mentions the woodland Indian obsession with witches. Very often supposed witches, usually elderly chiefs whom younger men wanted to move out or unmarried women with enemies, were tortured and killed; the Prophet eagerly participated in these killings as a judge. You won't read that in the sanitized Indian hagiographies they teach schoolchildren as history nowadays.

Almost all the Shawnee immediately converted. Other surrounding Indians were a harder sell, though some took to the new religion, especially Wyandots and Miamis, and many expressed interest, travelling to hear the Prophet speak. Thus, Tenskwatawa quickly became regionally famous, but at this time, around 1806, Tecumseh continued to be obscure—if mentioned at all, mentioned as “the Prophet's brother.” Nonetheless, those who noticed him observed his charisma, presence, and leadership ability, and his rise to prominence can be dated to this time—perhaps prefigured by the name his parents gave him, which meant “shooting star” or “blazing comet.”

Tensions between the young United States and Great Britain were rising again, primarily the result of the Napoleonic Wars and their impact on American trade. The Indians held frequent conferences with various representatives of the United States, in a complicated dance asking for money and goods, but also reassurances about their land. Meanwhile chiseling agents of the government, including William Henry Harrison, sometime military leader and now governor of the Indiana Territory, steadily ate away at Indian land title by bribing chiefs to sell land at pennies on the dollar. The United States was well aware, though, that if

war came with Britain, the Indians might ally with Britain and attempt to retake their lands. And so it happened.

Tecumseh, in the years leading up to open war between Britain and the United States, acted as a Shawnee ambassador, both spreading the message of his brother and trying to create a new political alliance among different contiguous tribes. Indian alliances were notoriously short-term and opportunistic, making this an uphill climb, and in general both of Tecumseh's messages were received coolly. Moreover, the Americans were aware of these efforts and opposed them, manipulating those Tecumseh sought to persuade with cash and alcohol. The ins and outs of the period 1806 to 1812 are complex, but covered in detail by Cozzens, including a famous and acrimonious council between Harrison and Tecumseh in 1810 at Harrison's estate in Vincennes.

In 1811 Tecumseh finally achieved greater success recruiting Indian allies, helped by the belief among some Indians that war with the Americans was inevitable, and also by the Great Comet of 1811, visible for five months and sold by Tecumseh as an omen of their coming victory under his leadership. Tecumseh even made a long southern journey, trying and failing to convince the Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Cherokee, in today's Mississippi and Alabama, to join his confederacy. Cozzens casts Tecumseh as a firm believer in his brother's faith, a matter of historical dispute, but this was primarily a political recruiting effort—the Prophet's message never resonated much beyond the Prophet himself. Yet we should remember that this effort was nearly unprecedented; Tecumseh was a visionary, the rare man who can see and act beyond the constraints of his upbringing and culture, seeing what has to be done and doing it.

Meanwhile, the Indians Tecumseh had already recruited, Shawnees and parts of allied tribes, were grouped around Tenskwatawa in Prophetstown, near today's Lafayette, Indiana. The others were Wyandots, Kickapoos, Potawatomis, and Miamis, but no tribe joined the Prophet and Tecumseh wholesale; it was usually belligerent young men who flocked to them. Harrison, in a military role though he was still governor, marched up the Wabash from Vincennes in southern Indiana, fearing that Tecumseh would bring more warriors from the south and start a war, which Harrison figured to nip in the bud. The Prophet did not want to fight Harrison, but the warriors around him

were young and impatient, and he had sold them on the belief that his magic would guarantee victory. Harrison, camped near Prophetstown, made impossible demands that the Indians disperse and leave Indiana. So the Prophet's forces, while Tecumseh was hundreds of miles away, in the early morning of November 7, 1811, attacked Harrison—and were defeated, although not as badly as Harrison, eager to burnish his political image, would have it. This is the battlefield I wandered in my youth.

Tecumseh returned and rejoined his brother and what remained of the Indiana Shawnees; what they said to each other is not recorded. The winter of 1812 featured widespread, but sporadic, Indian violence across the Indiana Territory, also ranging up through today's Chicago and into Wisconsin, as well as Michigan. The Shawnee brothers threw their lot completely in with the British, who held forts in and around Detroit, and who were now formally at war with the Americans. The latter sent strong forces northwards to subdue British Canada; the British promised the Indians they would never retreat. But after American naval forces succeeded in dominating the Great Lakes and thus cut British supply lines to western Canada, the British felt they had to abandon Detroit and retreat east, which the Indians saw as a betrayal, with many promptly abandoning the fight. Tecumseh traveled east with the British, bitterly demanding the British stand and fight—and when they did, Tecumseh died, shot through the heart at the Battle of the Thames, in today's Ontario, October 5, 1813. Tecumseh's alliance, the last attempt by the woodlands Indians to act collectively, died with him. The remaining Algonquins moved to Canada, where their descendants still reside. The Prophet lived on in obscurity and poverty for another twenty years; by the time he died, he was nothing but a curiosity. Tecumseh was posthumously admired for his virtues by the young United States; his death is shown in many artworks, not least in the Rotunda of the Capitol. They don't say much about him in schools today, preferring to focus on helpless victims and supposed emancipations, rather than heroic deeds and lives.

A great many fascinating details about Indian culture are brought out by this book, making it more interesting than a mere work of dry history. (Cozzens never uses or even adverts to the stupid term "Native American," though it appears on the dustjacket.) No surprise, the Shawnee were fiercely racist—they thought they were superior to the

whites, because they were first born of creation, and for that matter, they were superior to other Indians, though both Indians and whites had a pecking order. The Long Knives, according to Tenskwatawa, were not human at all, merely demons who crossed the Stinking Lake as scum on the waves. This racism is not a knock against the Shawnee; some degree of racial empathy among similar people is inevitable—the challenge is managing it to make it not excessively pernicious (something at which the America of today is failing, as the deliberate whipping up of racial hatred in 2020 shows). Yet at the same time, the Shawnee, like all the woodlands Indians, adopted whites, and mixed-race individuals, métis, were often prominent in Indian leadership, helped by having a foot in each camp. In fact, several of the closest companions of Tecumseh's youth were kidnapped white boys, most of whom ultimately returned to the whites, but some of whom died with him. As Sebastian Junger says in *Tribe*, this disinclination of forcibly adopted whites to return to civilization, and the not infrequent leaving of civilization by adult whites to join the Indians, says something about European civilization, not complimentary.

Cozzens also touches on harsher topics. He says rape was forbidden by traditional Shawnee beliefs, and the Shawnee were very disciplined in all sexual matters. But later he refers to Ojibwa allies raping Shawnee women (and the Shawnee then getting payback by shooting their "allies" in the back in a subsequent battle), so it must have occurred sometimes among the woodlands Indians. In his earlier book, Cozzens notes that rape was common among the Western Indians, so any differences among Indian tribes were cultural (and the occasionally heard claim that rape is a purely European phenomenon just propaganda). Torture and cannibalism of captives by Indians were routine, as well—a captive never knew whether he or she would be adopted or tortured to death, though adoption was more common unless the Indians were seeking revenge for some recent affront or defeat.

The most interesting topic, perhaps, is alcohol and the Indians. Alcohol, even more than disease, destroyed both Indian populations and their will to resist the Europeans. Governments constantly issued dictates forbidding trading alcohol to Indians, but to no effect, since it was far easier to get the Indians drunk and steal their goods, or trade for them at rock-bottom prices to Indians desperate to get alcohol, than to

trade honestly, and the government, British or American, was always unwilling or unable to enforce this and other dictates with respect to the Indians.

The catastrophic effects of alcohol on the Indians tend to be deemphasized today because their extreme affinity for it is felt to reflect poorly on the Indians. Many or most Indians became raging alcoholics when given alcohol (not Tecumseh, though he did drink upon occasion), and those who did not were happy to get roaring drunk whenever they could. It was common for Indians to literally drink themselves to death, and they frequently did extremely harmful things under the influence of alcohol, such as slaughtering their own livestock, or murdering each other over trivial matters. Australian Aborigines have a similar reaction to alcohol, so I imagine it is related to some genetic quirk in populations never exposed before to alcohol. But of course we are not allowed to talk about genetic differences today. A quick glance around the internet shows a wild desperation to reject the historical truth about the Indian lust for alcohol, including Google curating its results to avoid any support for it—though they don't deny other genetic traits tied to alcohol, such as the "Asian flush." And Wikipedia, showing why it is a highly dubious historical aid to memory, unhelpfully lies to us in racist fashion, blaming the white man: "Native Americans typically experience higher rates of alcohol use compared to other ethnicities as a result of acculturative stress directly and indirectly associated with historical trauma." Nope. Indians just loved (and love) to get drunk, never mind the damage they knew would result.

However, let's not end on a sour note. Yes, Tecumseh lost. He was foredoomed to lose. But his actions, his blazing course across the sky of the Ohio Valley, speak to us still today. One should be careful not to believe the myth of the noble savage, but also careful not to fall into the opposite error, that peoples more primitive than us cannot provide exemplars to us. Tecumseh, man of grandeur mixed with tragedy, was a Man of Destiny. He tried to preserve his culture—and he did not back down, he did not count the cost, but did the very best he could with what he had. It was not enough, but that says nothing bad about his character, and tells us nothing about what success other men, yet to appear, who embody his virtues but apply them to new challenges in a new time, will have.

Tecumseh proves that such men arise across cultures. Whether they arise in desiccated cultures such as ours, I am not so sure. The Shawnee, as all the woodland Indians, chose their leaders, most of all their war leaders, by leadership ability and success, so the best men came to the fore. We've abandoned that, so how can a Man of Destiny gain traction in America today? The hyper-feminized reaction to the Wuhan Plague suggests that, perhaps, like good seed cast on hard ground, our Man of Destiny may not find a receptive audience. Yet almost certainly, if the truth were allowed to be ferreted out, more people voted for Donald Trump than for Joe Biden, which suggests the ground only appears hard, because we are fed propaganda that it is hard, to demoralize those who are based in reality. Similarly, most likely the cowardly reaction to the Plague we see all around us appears as the norm because of the societal pressure put on everyone to outwardly comply, combined with massive censorship of those who are willing to state the truth. No, I think the Man of Destiny will be welcomed when he comes—not by all, but by enough.

Nonetheless, the Man of Destiny will not arise until the day is far gone, when the feet of clay that support our society crumble. Cometh the hour, cometh the man. I think, reading this book, that after all, we are just waiting for a new, and not that very different, Tecumseh.