

Black Hawk: A Reassessment

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THE FIRST IMPORTANT WORK of literature by an Iowa resident was produced before statehood was achieved by an author who did not want to live west of the Mississippi and certainly did not regard himself as a man of letters. The *Autobiography of Black Hawk* (1833), which records the unsuccessful struggle of that famous Sauk chief to retain his home in Illinois, has never been the subject of intensive analysis, in spite of its historical and literary value. Even though it is a nonfictional work, the book deserves a sympathetic critical examination because it is an interesting and complex piece of self-revelation, and it provides a rare opportunity to experience the Sauk and Fox destiny in our region from the Indian point of view. Of course, the autobiography—like all of the Chief's spoken works—was written down by a white interpreter, for Black Hawk knew little English and was not a writer. Hence, Antoine LeClair stands between us and the Chief, as does the "Editor and Amanuensis," J. B. Patterson, who perhaps affected the organization of the work.¹ Nevertheless, the *Autobiography of Black Hawk* is essentially a literary creation of the famous Indian leader. Surviving along with it are several speeches, the most important of which are the

¹For a discussion of the reliability of these two men and the authenticity of the autobiography, see *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, ed. Donald Jackson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955), pp. 31-37.

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Chief's address to his captor at Fort Armstrong shortly after the Black Hawk War and his speech at a Fourth of July banquet in Fort Madison the year before his death. When the autobiography and speeches are examined for insights into the Chief rather than corroboration of Black Hawk War data, they disclose a great deal about this remarkable man and his tragic struggle.

In the closing years of his life Black Hawk was a very controversial figure, for his resistance to the white advance made him a hero in the eyes of some Americans and a villain in the eyes of others. And in spite of the fact that he dictated his life story "to give my motives and reasons for my former hostilities to the whites, and to vindicate my character from misrepresentation," the autobiography did nothing to resolve the controversy. For example, Patterson, the western Illinois newspaperman who published the autobiography, felt that in doing so he was "presenting to the public the life of a Hero who has lately taken such a high rank among the distinguished individuals of America." On the other hand, John Reynolds, who was Governor of Illinois during the Black Hawk War and who later read the autobiography, asserted in his own life story that "Black Hawk was a treacherous and evil-disposed Indian." And half a century later, this disagreement remained. Perry A. Armstrong, in an extensive study called *The Sauks and the Black Hawk War* (1887), declared that "Black Hawk was unquestionably, when considered all in all, warrior, statesman, diplomat, and Christian, the peer if not the superior of any Indian of his age. . . ." In contrast, Frank E. Stevens, in *The Black Hawk War* (1903), viewed the Chief as a "cold-blooded aggressor and murderer."²

Of course, Black Hawk has often been discussed by scholars whose views were less extreme, but most of the important studies actually focus on the war which carries his name rather

²"Dedication," *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 43; "Advertisement," *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 44; John Reynolds, *My Own Times* (1854-55; reprint ed., Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1879), pp. 221-222; Perry A. Armstrong, *The Sauks and the Black Hawk War* (Springfield, Illinois: H. W. Rokker, 1887), p. 519 (Armstrong's work, although untrustworthy in some respects, offers much invaluable information about the Sauks.); Frank E. Stevens, *The Black Hawk War* (Chicago: Frank E. Stevens, 1903), p. 59.

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than on the man himself.³ There are two notable exceptions. Cyrenus Cole's *I Am a Man: The Indian Black Hawk* (1938) is the only modern work (other than a few juvenile books) which could be called a biography of the Chief, even though it also includes chapters on Tecumsah, Lincoln, Fort Madison, and other matters. Although worth reading, it is not a very sensitive study of Black Hawk, and the author fails to adopt a critical attitude toward his materials. (For example, even the speeches of most doubtful attribution are fully accepted by Cole.) William T. Hagan's *The Sac and Fox Indians* (1958) covers the entire history of the Sauk tribe, but it focuses on the Black Hawk War and gives much attention to the Chief. This is a very helpful volume for readers of the *Autobiography of Black Hawk* because it is well documented. However, Hagan views the Chief negatively—calling him, for example, “the simple Black Hawk”—and emphasizes that he was not a great leader: “Black Hawk, whom romancers strove to make into a striking hero of a noble cause, was hardly comparable to Pontiac, Tecumsah, or even the later Sitting Bull. The Sac brave had little organizing ability or political acumen. It was the cause and not the man which swelled the ranks of the British Band [i.e., Black Hawk's

³Benjamin Drake's *The Life and Adventures of Black Hawk* (Cincinnati: G. Conclin, 1838) was the most popular nineteenth-century account of Black Hawk and the war, and in spite of its limitations, the book is still worth reading. Reuben G. Thwaites' *The Story of the Black Hawk War* (Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1892) was the first sound, unbiased treatment of the war. Anthony F. C. Wallace's “Prelude to Disaster,” in *The Black Hawk War, 1831-1832*, 3 vols., ed. Ellen M. Whitney (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1970), 1:1-51, is the best brief discussion of the events which led to the war. And Ellen Whitney's three-volume collection of war records is, of course, invaluable. Thomas Froncek's “I Was Once a Great Warrior: The Tragedy of Black Hawk, Who Became the Eponym of a War He Tried to Avoid,” *American Heritage* 24 (December 1972): 16-21, 97-99, gives a sympathetic and readable view of the Chief—although it is merely a brief undocumented article that is largely devoted to summarizing the events of the war. Cecil Eby's “That Disgraceful Affair”: *The Black Hawk War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), although important, tends to be overly critical of people on both sides of the conflict. The most useful bibliography, although now more than twenty years old, is found in William T. Hagan's *The Sac and Fox Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958).

band]. . . ."⁴ While Hagan's assessment is not completely wrong, it is overly severe. The Chief was surely not the equal of Pontiac or Tecumseh as a leader, but neither was he "the simple Black Hawk." Hagan fails to mention most of Black Hawk's speeches and gives the autobiography itself no separate attention.

Black Hawk: An Autobiography (1955), edited by Donald Jackson, is the only modern edition of the Chief's autobiography. On the one hand, this edition offers a fine, well-annotated text, but on the other, Jackson provides an introduction that is helpful only for viewing the work as a record of the Black Hawk War. There are no aids for understanding it as a literary work—the Chief's account of his own life and, hence, an expression of his values and his sense of relationship to the Sauk culture. No mention is made of Black Hawk's speeches, no discussion of Sauk traditions is presented, no assessment of the Chief's character as revealed in the autobiography is offered. Indeed, the poverty of Jackson's conception of Black Hawk as a man is indicated by the only paragraph he devotes to the subject: "Black Hawk was never a great Indian statesman like Tecumseh or a persuasive orator like Keokuk. He was not a hereditary chief or a medicine man. He was only a stubborn warrior brooding upon the certainty that his people must fight to survive."⁵ Like Hagan's view, this is very reductive, and for the same reason: to deny the Chief any stature as a leader. This view could stand as a summation of modern scholarly opinion on Black Hawk even to the present day, twenty-five years after it was written. An intensive examination of the Chief's life as presented in the autobiography and speeches—although necessarily restricted to the man's own view of his values, motives, and actions—could hardly fail to broaden our understanding of him. If he fell short of being a great leader, we may still come to respect him as a man.

Black Hawk begins his life story with an account of his great-grandfather, Nanamakee, and how he came to be war chief of the Sauks. Black Hawk gives special attention to the ceremony

⁴Hagan, *Sac and Fox Indians*, pp. 130, 203.

⁵"Introduction," *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 38.

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in which Nanàmakee's father, Mukatáquet, passed war control of the tribe to his son, for it mentions a token that was later all-important to Black Hawk: "He now presented the great medicine bag to Na-nà-ma-kee, and told him, 'that he cheerfully resigned it to him—it is the soul of our nation—it has never yet been disgraced—and I will expect you to keep it unsullied!'"⁶ The symbolic bag, which Black Hawk received upon his father's death, signified that its owner bore at least two complementary responsibilities: the protection of the tribe and the maintenance of the Sauk military heritage (the undisgraced soul of the nation). The tragedy of Black Hawk occurred when they became mutually exclusive.

The Chief also spends a good deal of time in the autobiography discussing his early military exploits against the Osages and Cherokees (pp. 52-57). His warrior's ethics, which are centered around revenge and defense of the Sauk land, are perfectly consistent throughout the narrative. As he says later in the book, "All our wars are predicated by the relatives of those killed; or by aggressions upon our hunting grounds" (p. 105). Defense against encroachment upon tribal land—whether by Indians or whites—was, then, an important ethical responsibility for the Sauks. Furthermore, pride in military achievement was expected from all warriors. Indeed, the very purpose of the Sauk national dance, which Black Hawk describes (pp. 103-104), was to allow warriors to relate their exploits publicly so that the tribe could share their pride and young warriors would be inspired to attempt similar heroic deeds. And Black Hawk had much to be proud of, for he had become a brave at the very early age of fifteen and was an acknowledged military leader while still in his teens. Hence, he had been defending the tribe for half a century by the time of the Black Hawk War.

These early military episodes also offer a convincing demonstration of the Chief's frankness and desire to be complete in telling his story, for his autobiography was being produced to be read by white people, many of whom regarded him as a bloodthirsty aggressor. Recollections of his own killings and

⁶*Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 50. All subsequent references to the text of Black Hawk's autobiography are to this edition by Donald Jackson, and page numbers will be given parenthetically.

scalpings would hardly have been included by a man who was simply trying to present a sympathetic picture of himself to a white public.

THE TREATY OF 1804 ceded to the United States all of the Sauk and Fox lands east of the Mississippi River; disagreement over its validity and meaning precipitated the Black Hawk War. According to the Chief, it was concluded in St. Louis by Sauks who had not gone there for that purpose, who did not represent the tribal chiefs, and who had been drunk much of the time (p. 61). Other evidence tends to confirm this story about the making of the treaty,⁷ but even beyond the question of the treaty's legitimacy is article seven of the document, which specifically states that "As long as the lands which are now ceded to the United States remain their property, the Indians belonging to said tribes, shall enjoy the privilege of living and hunting upon them."⁸ What this meant to the white men was that the Indians could stay as long as the land was in the public domain but would have to move when it was sold to white settlers. This distinction between public and private ownership was not explained to the Indians at the time of the treaty, nor was it meant to be; otherwise, article seven would have been more explicit. This point was, however, made clear to Black Hawk much later, after the Sauks were told to move across the Mississippi River. But still, he quite rightly found no support in the treaty for their removal: "I was told that, according to the treaty, we had no *right* to remain upon the lands *sold*, and that the government would *force* us to leave them. There was but a small portion, however, that *had been sold*; the balance remaining in the hands of the government, we claimed the right (if we had no other) to 'live and hunt upon, as long as it remained the property of the government' . . ." (p. 119). According to Perry Armstrong, less than three thousand of the more than fifty million acres ceded in the treaty had been surveyed and

⁷See Jackson's footnotes on pages 62-64, which confirm that the Treaty of 1804 was concluded in an unfortunate way.

⁸"Treaty of 1804," *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 185.

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sold when the Indians were told to move across the Mississippi River.⁹

Black Hawk is certainly correct when he sums up the matter of the treaty by saying, "It has been the source of all our difficulties" (p. 62). More than anything else, this experience taught him to dislike and distrust the Americans. Hence, it is not surprising that he fought for the British in the War of 1812, especially since a British colonel, Robert Dickson, indicated to Black Hawk that his country's soldiers would keep the Americans from taking the Sauk lands. The Chief's view of the difference between the Americans and the British prior to that war is given in the autobiography: "*I had not discovered one good trait in the character of the Americans that had come to the country! They made fair promises but never fulfilled them! Whilst the British made but few—but we could always rely upon their word!*" (p. 68).

A couple of years after the war, Black Hawk himself signed the Treaty of 1816 in St. Louis, which simply reaffirmed the earlier (1804) treaty, *including article seven*. It is difficult to say why, by that time, the Chief had become reconciled to the idea of a treaty that ceded lands to the whites, but the officials may have withheld annuities until the second document was signed. (The Sauks did not sign the treaty, in fact, until a year after they had been requested to do so.) Black Hawk's account of the signing ceremony indicates that there was considerable pressure by the Americans to confirm the earlier treaty—even to the point of threatening war. In any case, it is clear that the Chief understood the treaty as a bill of sale referring only to unoccupied Indian lands—if he understood it as a bill of sale at all—for he comments, "I touched the goose quill to the treaty—not knowing, however, that, by my act, I consented to give away my village. Had that been explained to me, I should have opposed it, and never would have signed their treaty, as my recent conduct will clearly prove" (p. 98).

This statement is supported by his later remark that in 1829 the trader, George Davenport, had to explain to him that the treaty agreement meant that they would have to abandon the

⁹ Armstrong, *Sauks and the Black Hawk War*, p. 120.



*Black Hawk. Sketch by Charles A. Gray
after a portrait by C. B. King.*

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village. The Chief then discussed the point with Quàshquàmè, leader of the group that signed the original (1804) treaty: "after questioning Quàsh-quàmè about the sale of the lands, he assured me that he 'never had consented to the sale of our village'" (p. 111).¹⁰ Of course, Black Hawk may have been deceived by Quàshquàmè and his party—who could have been too embarrassed by their unauthorized sale of the lands to also admit selling the village—but the Chief clearly believed them. As he explained to former Illinois Governor Thomas Cole and western writer James Hall, "Quàsh-quàmè and his party *denied*, positively, having ever sold my village; and . . . as I had never known them to *lie*, I was determined to keep it in possession" (p. 116).

Beyond this, Black Hawk felt that there was enough land for the whites without Saukenuk (the tribal village), even if the whites felt it was included in the treaty: "I had an interview with Ke-o-kuk, to see if this difficulty could not be settled with our Great Father—and told him to propose to give other land (any that our Great Father might choose, even our *lead mines*,) to be peaceably permitted to keep the small point of land on which our village and fields were situate. I was of the opinion that the white people had plenty of land, and would never take our village from us" (p. 112). He was shocked early in 1829, to return from a hunt and find a white family occupying his lodge and other families located in the village area. He insisted that they leave and tried to get assistance from the Indian agent, but to no avail. The subsequent attempt by Black Hawk's band to co-exist with the settlers at Saukenuk was marked by white abuse of the Indians—according to the autobiography—and simply increased the hostile feelings on both sides.

For Black Hawk the possibility of losing his village was the most distressing result of the claims and actions of the whites. The rest of the Sauk land east of the Mississippi River was comparatively unimportant, especially since the American government had agreed to give the tribe a compensatory annuity.

¹⁰Jackson mentions that, according to the papers of Thomas Forsyth in the Draper Collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society, "Quàshquàmè said he had agreed in part, but did not understand that he was selling any land above the Rock River" (p. 63n).

Saukenuk, on the other hand, was the physical embodiment of what the tradition of the medicine bag was all about: the secure and prosperous life of the tribe, which was primarily the product of a successful military heritage.

Black Hawk's description of Saukenuk is idyllic, a veritable proof of the early American romantic notion of the Indian wonderland in the wilderness:

Our village was situated on the north side of Rock River, at the foot of its rapids, and on the point of land between Rock River and the Mississippi. In its front, a prairie extended to the bank of the Mississippi, and in our rear, a continued bluff, gently ascending from the prairie. On the side of this bluff we had our cornfields. . . . We had about eight hundred acres in cultivation. . . . The land around our village, uncultivated, was covered with bluegrass, which made excellent pasture for our horses. Several fine springs broke out of the bluff, near by, from which we were supplied with good water. The rapids of Rock River furnished us with an abundance of excellent fish, and the land, being good, never failed to produce good crops of corn, beans, pumpkins, and squashes. We always had plenty. . . .
(p. 100)

His recognition of the good life that this place had provided for his people is apparent. The very least that Saukenuk stood for in Black Hawk's mind was the prosperous life of his tribe, and removal from that place, to unbroken ground across the river, meant the abandonment of prosperity.

Closely allied with this is the cultural significance of Saukenuk for the people who resided there, for Indian traditions develop from the life of the tribe in a particular location. Hence, the Chief includes in the autobiography descriptions of the customs, dances, and stories that governed the lives of his people in that place—such as the medicine feast, the national dance, and the legend of the origin of corn (pp. 101-107)—all of which were a part of their identity as Sauks. It is not accidental that the village bore the name of the tribe: *Saukenuk*.

But Black Hawk also clearly indicates that the ultimate deprivation which came with the loss of their home was spiritual: "What! to be driven from our village and hunting grounds, and not even permitted to visit the graves of our forefathers, our

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relations and friends?" (p. 101). For the Sauks, as for all Indians, there was more to the land than just physical characteristics and agricultural potential. Tradition, religion, ethics: these were bound up with the spirit world of their forefathers, and to sever the tie of heritage as embodied in a village like Saukenuk was to cut themselves adrift in a world without meaning. The Chief found it difficult to believe that the Americans had so little understanding of the importance of Saukenuk to his tribe in terms of their heritage and spiritual values as to demand their removal. As he says, "I did not think it possible that our Great Father wished us to leave our village, where we had lived so long, and where the bones of so many of our people had been laid" (pp. 116-117).

Very soon Black Hawk's narrative depicts the increased pressure of the whites, who "entered our village, *burnt our lodges, destroyed our fences, ploughed up our corn, and beat our people,*" all the while complaining that the Indians were the intruders (pp. 115-116). This development (in 1829) forced the question of relocation, causing the Sauk tribe to split into the peace party (headed by Keokuk) and the war party (headed by Black Hawk). As the Chief says,

We were a divided people, forming two parties. Ke-o-kuk being at the head of one, willing to barter our rights merely for the good opinion of the whites; and cowardly enough to desert our village to them. I was at the head of the other party, and was determined to hold on to my village, although I had been *ordered* to leave it. But, I considered, as myself and band had no agency in selling our country—and that as provision had been made in the treaty for us all to remain on it as long as it belonged to the United States, that we could not be *forced* away. I refused, therefore, to quit my village. It was here, that I was born—and here lie the bones of many friends and relations. For this spot I felt a sacred reverence, and never could consent to leave it, without being forced therefrom. (p. 121)

This passage is significant for three reasons. First, the Chief is deliberately contrasting his attitude with that of Keokuk, who had replaced him as war chief (while he was away during the War of 1812) by making a big speech to the tribal chiefs that concluded with the words, "Give me charge of your warriors;

I'll defend the village . . ." (p. 83). Hence, in Black Hawk's view, Keokuk was abandoning the commitment that went along with being war chief. Like the Americans with whom he got along so well, Keokuk was failing to keep his word. Second, Black Hawk portrays himself here, as elsewhere in his life story, as a man of considerable thoughtfulness, and so any idea that he was merely temperamental or stubborn does not do justice to his intellectual complexity. Third, his final words make a distinction between being forced to leave his village and merely abandoning it without a struggle. The one road was honorable, and in keeping with the undisgraced tradition of the Sauks, but the other was not, representing cowardice and, probably, the destruction of the tie of sacred reverence.

Black Hawk also had a personal attachment to Saukenuk as the place where he had spent a lifetime (more than sixty years), and where tribal heritage had given meaning to all of his actions. His clearest expression of this attachment displays the sensitivity and intransigence which made his subsequent defeat such a great personal tragedy: "When I called to mind the scenes of my youth, and those of later days—and reflected that the theatre on which these were acted had been so long the home of my fathers, who now slept on the hills around it, I could not bring my mind to consent to leave this country to the whites, for any earthly consideration" (p. 121). Clearly, Black Hawk sensed the presence of the spirits of the dead upon the landscape around the village, and felt those forefathers were watching him, as they had watched his early exploits in the area. By their very presence, they advocated his struggle for the land, while among the living, many Indians and whites advocated abandonment. Which of his responsibilities represented by the medicine bag, and embodied in the village itself, was he to disregard: tradition and tribal identity, or security for his people? It was a tragic dilemma, and caught like Hamlet between the claims of the living and the dead, he agonized over his decision: "I fasted, and called upon the Great Spirit to direct my steps to the right path" (p. 121). Unfortunately, Black Hawk did not even have his tribe united behind him; as a Sauk leader sensitive to this dilemma, he was very much alone. Certainly Keokuk was not greatly troubled about breaking the tie of sacred reverence for

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the dead by simply giving in to the white demand for the village—and its graveyard.

More than one commentator on Black Hawk and the war has noted the apparent inconsistency between his assertion that he would never consent to leave Saukenuk and his remark soon afterward that he would go if the tribe was given \$6,000 for provisions and other articles (pp. 122, 81n). But in the autobiography he explains his reasoning: "After thinking some time, I agreed, that I could honourably give up, by being paid for it, according to our customs; but . . . I could not make the proposal myself, even if I wished, because it would be dishonorable in me to do so" (p. 122). The Chief had evidently determined that the Sauk custom of being paid to avoid hostilities (as in the case of a relative who would otherwise be obligated to avenge the death of his kinsmen) could be applied here, as perhaps the best way out of the dilemma. Saukenuk would be abandoned, but at least with honor, and with enough money to insure the survival of the tribe while they moved elsewhere to establish a village and plant crops. That Black Hawk was tormented by this action is evident in the narrative, for he did not tell his supporters about what he had done, and, he recalls: "I did not much like what had been done myself, and tried to banish it from my mind" (p. 123).

Had the Americans agreed to make such an offer, war would never have occurred, but instead, the officials in St. Louis made a harsh and foolish response to the plan: they offered nothing, and demanded that the Sauks leave immediately or be driven off. The die was cast. Black Hawk's response indicates, not disappointment, but release from mental anguish: "I was not much displeased with the answer brought by the [American] war chief, because I would rather have laid my bones with my forefathers, than remove for any consideration. Yet if a friendly offer had been made, as I expected, I would, for the sake of my women and children, have removed peaceably" (p. 123).

Having attempted a compromise he could now pursue the path that was personally more pleasing to a man of his respect for tradition, spiritual sensitivity, and military orientation. As he says, "I now resolved to remain in my village, and make no resistance, if the military came, but submit to my fate! I

impressed the importance of this course on all my band, and directed them, in case the military came, not to raise an arm against them" (p. 123). This too was not a stubborn or temperamental move, but a daring stratagem. They would assert their right to the village by remaining, but if the soldiers came, the Sauks would submit to being removed. In this way, Saukenuk would be lost with honor (because they did not abandon it, but were driven away), and in the absence of an actual battle, lives would be spared.

At this point, The Prophet—the half-Sauk, half-Winnebago religious leader named White Cloud—began to exert an influence on the Chief, encouraging him to resist the Americans. The Prophet probably did not have a significant effect on the actions of Black Hawk until just before the war broke out. While the latter freely admits to being encouraged by White Cloud's advice, his decisions were predicated upon his own values and inclinations. As Black Hawk says at one point in the autobiography, "We have men among us, like the whites, who pretend to know the right path. . . . I have no faith in their paths—but believe every man must make his own path!" (p. 105).

Because White Cloud offered the only support for Black Hawk's course of action outside of the war band itself, the Chief respected him. However, The Prophet did eventually deceive Black Hawk by telling him that he had talked with British officials who had promised assistance if the Chief resisted the Americans (pp. 132-133). Black Hawk was not being manipulated by The Prophet's advice; he was simply deceived by a carefully concocted lie. The Chief's positive attitude toward the character of the British, his willingness to fight on *their* side in the War of 1812, and his belief in Indian truthfulness and integrity promoted his acceptance of White Cloud's deception.

When General Gaines arrived at the Indian agency and convened a council for the purpose of telling Black Hawk that he must leave, the latter attended, refused to comply, and the following remarks were made:

The war chief [Gaines], apparently angry, rose and said:—
"Who is *Black Hawk*? Who is *Black Hawk*?"

I responded: "I am *Sac*! my forefather was a *Sac*! and all the nations call me a *SAC*!!" (p. 126)

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There could be no better evidence of the Chief's identification with the life and heritage of his tribe. Moreover, to resist the white demands was to assert his own identity in the only meaningful way—by preserving the contact between his people and the land and tradition that made them Sauks. When this contact was finally gone, so was the Chief's sense of identity.

In June of 1831, Illinois militiamen—ordered into action by Governor Reynolds—were sent to seize the village, but Black Hawk and his people, fearing possible extermination by the Indian-hating volunteers, crossed the Mississippi River the night before they arrived. The frustrated militiamen burned Saukenuk to the ground. Not long afterward, threatened with further pursuit, Black Hawk signed an agreement that he would not return to the Illinois side of the river. General Gaines agreed to give the Chief's people corn in the place of what was left growing in their fields, but as Black Hawk says, "the corn that had been given us, was soon found to be inadequate," and his people went through a very difficult winter. The Chief himself apparently felt that there was nothing else he could do to regain the village, for at one point, he went to the trader and "asked permission to be buried in the graveyard at our village, among my old friends and warriors" (pp. 129-130).

The Black Hawk War soon followed. The Chief's desperate attempt to regain the village (or, at least, to regain the use of their cornfields) was initiated as a result of the false promises of Indian and British assistance from The Prophet (and Neapope, another Sauk chief), which caused him to return to Illinois on April 5, 1832. Quite simply, those deceitful advisers asserted that the Ottawas, Chippewas, Pottawatomies, and Winnebagoes were prepared to fight alongside the Sauks, and that the British would support them (pp. 132-133). If defeated, the Indians would receive refuge in Canada. (Also, the lies about British help mentioned provisions for Black Hawk's people.) The tense situation—with Sauks again on the Illinois side of the river—needlessly erupted into actual fighting through the disgraceful actions of the soldiers who fired on Indians attempting to negotiate a surrender at Stillman's Run (May 14, 1832). And the war-which-was-not-a-war was forced to a bloody conclusion by the pursuit of Black Hawk's weary and starving group

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north into Wisconsin, where the slaughter of Indian men, women, and children took place at Bad Axe River (August 27, 1832).

Shortly after the climactic battle, Black Hawk surrendered, but first, he gave his most important possession to a Winnebago chief at Prairie La Cross: "I then took my *medicine bag*, and addressed the chief. I told him it was 'the soul of the Sac nation—that it had never been dishonored in any battle—take it, it is my life—dearer than life. . . .' He said he would keep it, and take care of it, and if I was suffered to live, he would send it to me" (p. 162). The Chief was taking precautions that the medicine bag of his forefathers, which represented his (and their) commitment to defend the tribe and preserve the undisgraced soul of the Sauk nation, would not be desecrated or destroyed by the soldiers. With Saukenuk gone, the token itself was probably all the more important, as the only tangible representation of the heritage that he felt bound to uphold.

After his surrender, Black Hawk delivered a speech to General Street, who held him prisoner; it is the most significant statement of his perspective on the hostilities outside of the autobiography. The address is a forceful piece of oratory, as the Chief describes how the bullets at Bad Axe "whizzed by our ears like the wind through the trees in winter" and then confronts his listeners with the white man's deception, racial hatred, and taking of Indian land:

Year after year the white men came to cheat the Indians and steal their land. You know why we went to war. Every white man knows why. They should be ashamed of what they do. The white men hate the Indians and drive them from their homes. . . .

The white men are bad teachers. Their looks are false, their actions are false. They smile in the face of the poor Indian to cheat him. They shake his hand to gain his trust, they get him drunk and then cheat him.¹¹

¹¹The speech of Chief Black Hawk, in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, 2 vols., ed. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 1:1182. (An abbreviated version of this speech also appears in Stevens, *Black Hawk War*, p. 239.)

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This message is all the more powerful because it is so regrettably true, and it must have been impressive indeed coming from a man in chains. Later in the speech the Chief gives a summary of the white pressure on Indian land that eventually led to war—and the inevitable result for his tribe:

We went to our Great Father in Washington. We were encouraged. His Great Council gave us fair words and big promises. But nothing was done for us. Things were getting worse. There were no deer in the forest. The possum and the beaver disappeared. The springs were drying up, and our people had no food to keep from starving. We called a great council and built a great fire. The spirits of our fathers rose and told us to avenge our wrongs or die. We raised the war cry and dug up the tomahawk. Our knives were ready, and Black Hawk's heart swelled in his chest as he led his braves to war. He is content. He will go to the world of the spirits contented. He has done what he had to do. His father will meet him and praise him. Black Hawk is a true Indian. He pities his wife, his children, and his friends, but he does not care about himself. He cares about his people and the Indians. They will suffer. He pities their fate.¹²

This is, of course, a view of the matter from the standpoint of Black Hawk's Indian sensibility, rather than a factual account of what occurred. Concern for the tribe, desire for revenge, pride in warfare, and courage in the face of suffering were respected virtues from the Sauk heritage, and so he places these aspects in the forefront as he asserts that "Black Hawk is a true Indian." Likewise, he suggests that the tribe—or his band, at least—was receptive to the cry of their forefathers for revenge, so that the war for their land became an expression of the soul of the Sauk nation. And, indeed, it was, if we recognize that, with his love for the land, reverence for his forefathers, and respect for the tribal heritage, Black Hawk *was* the soul of the Sauk nation. His medicine bag was, after all, only a symbol of the spiritual self of the man who cherished it.

The very last words of this powerful address are also worth noting: "Farewell to Black Hawk!" He was looking toward his own death, of course, both because he was sixty-five when he

¹²Ibid.

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delivered the speech and because his fate in the hands of his captors was unsure. But the statement also foreshadowed the course of his later life, for with the loss of Saukenuk and all that it represented for him, Black Hawk's very identity was gone. Henceforth, he would not be a war chief, nor visit the graves of his forefathers, nor walk through the hills and fields around his village recalling the exploits that contributed to its security and distinction.

THE INNER PROCESS that Black Hawk went through after his defeat can be discerned by close attention to some of his later speeches. That the Chief himself feared a loss of identity if he, as war chief, failed to act in defense of their village is revealed in his speech to President Jackson in April of 1833. (To display the power of the American people and the extent of their domain, Jackson had the Chief and other Indian leaders brought to him in Washington and then taken to various other cities in the East.) Black Hawk frankly told the president, "I took up the hatchet, for my part, to revenge injuries which my people could no longer endure. Had I borne them longer without striking, my people would have said, 'Black Hawk is a woman; he is too old to be a chief; he is no Sac.'"¹³ It is not likely that any member of the tribe actually would have said this of the Chief if he failed to fight the Americans, but this much is clear: *he felt* that failure to act when it was justified threatened him with loss of identity. Ironically, perhaps, the fact that he acted to resist the Americans did not prevent that from occurring.

In any case, the President's strategy for convincing Black Hawk and the other war leaders of the folly of fighting against the United States was a success. They were amazed at the size of the eastern cities and the crowds that turned out to see and hear them. Furthermore, the Americans that Black Hawk came in contact with were friendly and often personally kind to him—in contrast to those he had often encountered on the frontier. In a speech delivered at Philadelphia in May of that same year, while

¹³ As quoted in Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, p. 259.

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not rejecting the reasons for which he fought, he discloses a great change in attitude:

My heart grew bitter against the whites, and my hands strong. I dug up the tomahawk, and led on my warriors to fight. I fought hard. I was no coward. Much blood was shed. But the white men were mighty. They were as many as the leaves of the forest. I and my people failed. I am sorry the tomahawk was raised. I have been a prisoner. I see the strength of the white men. They are many; very many. The Indians are but few. They are not cowards. They are brave, but they are few. While the Great Spirit above keeps my heart as it now is, I will be the white man's friend. I will remain in peace. I will go to my people and speak good of the white man. I will tell them that they are as the leaves of the forest, very many and very strong, and that I will fight no more against them.¹⁴

While traveling in the East, Black Hawk was treated as a great Sauk leader, a man who had fought for his village and his tribe. After his return to the banks of the Mississippi River, his defeat finally engulfed him. Just prior to being released at Fort Armstrong, the Chief iterated his realization that he now lacked status, village, and loyal followers—that his identity within the tribe was gone: "I told our great father in Washington that I would listen to the counsel of Keokuk. I shall soon be far away; I shall have no village, no band. I shall live alone."¹⁵ This speech was delivered in August of 1833, the same month in which he contacted Antoine LeClair about dictating an autobiography. Black Hawk's dedication to the volume, dated the "10th Moon [October], 1833," contains a sad comment that also reveals his unfortunate situation: "I am now an obscure member of a nation, that formerly honored and respected my opinions."¹⁶ And if confirmation of the Chief's loss of identity is required, there is the statement of George Catlin, the American painter. Four years after the war, he briefly described Black Hawk at a ceremony for the transference of still more lands from the Sauk and Fox Indians to the United States: "The poor dethroned monarch, old Black Hawk, was present, and looked

¹⁴ As quoted in Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, pp. 261-262.

¹⁵ As quoted in Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, p. 265.

¹⁶ "Dedication," *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 43.

an object of pity. With an old frock coat and brown hat on, and a cane in his hand, he stood the whole time outside the group, and in dumb and dismal silence. . . ."¹⁷ This is surely an appropriate visual representation of the fate of Black Hawk, for whom military defeat and the loss of Saukenuk—with its burden of traditions and responsibilities—was a great personal tragedy.

But if the Chief was entirely under the control of Keokuk for the rest of his life and no longer had a meaningful relationship to the Sauk culture, he was always, oddly enough, respected by the Americans, having become a living symbol of Indian resistance to the white advance (a safely defeated symbol). And Black Hawk kept his promise to maintain friendship with the nation that had taken his village and brought about his tragedy. Toward the end of his life he was invited to a Fourth of July banquet at Fort Madison, where he delivered his last extant address. It includes these words:

A few summers ago I was fighting against you. I did wrong, perhaps, but that is past. It is buried; let it be forgotten. Rock River was a beautiful country. I loved my towns, my cornfields and the home of my people. I fought for it. It is now yours. Keep it as we did. . . . I am now old. I have looked upon the Mississippi since I was a child. I love the great river. I have dwelt upon it banks from the time I was an infant. I look upon it now. I shake hands with you, and as it is my wish, I hope you are my friends.¹⁸

The theme of this speech is reconciliation, and so he deliberately avoids any mention of the white outrages before and during the war. Rather, he takes the undeserved burden upon himself, saying, "I did wrong, perhaps. . . ." And yet the very poignancy of his reference to the Rock River country around Saukenuk displays for all time the motivation for his struggle and the justice of his cause. It is significant too that the one consolation for him during this period of his life appears to have been the Mississippi River, a familiar landform from his childhood that

¹⁷ As quoted in "Epilogue: An Old Frock Coat and Brown Hat," *Black Hawk: An Autobiography*, p. 181.

¹⁸ As quoted in Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, p. 271.

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allowed him—though exiled forever from his spiritual home on the opposite side—to retain a sense of continuity that could bridge the tragic dislocation of 1832.

As this discussion shows, any view of Black Hawk that does not seriously consider his sense of relationship to the Sauk culture is bound to be shallow. He was not just a warrior prone to violence—although he relates with satisfaction his youthful exploits against enemy tribes, nor was he simply a stubborn leader—although he maintained the tribe's right to live at Saukenuk long after Keokuk's band had crossed the Mississippi River. He was, in fact, a true Indian, with all that the word implies about respect for tradition, reverence for the dead, love for the land, concern for the tribe, and pride in military accomplishment. But his deeply held set of values placed him in a difficult situation when the question of abandoning Saukenuk came up.

If the Chief's autobiography and speeches do not present a completely accurate and objective view of the Black Hawk War, that is certainly to be expected because of Black Hawk's age and his bias on behalf of his own side of the struggle. But a very detailed and sincere self-portrait does emerge from those spoken works, which helps us to see that, regardless of his shortcomings as a leader, the Chief was a fairly complex individual, caught in a dilemma that led to a great personal tragedy. It is this insight which makes the *Autobiography of Black Hawk* and his major speeches a priceless part of our midwestern literary heritage.

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