

## *William Henry Harrison and the Conquest of the Ohio Country* by David Curtis Skaggs

Sandy Antal

Volume 106, Number 2, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050704ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050704ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Antal, S. (2014). Review of [*William Henry Harrison and the Conquest of the Ohio Country* by David Curtis Skaggs]. *Ontario History*, 106(2), 282–283.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050704ar>

It is through the love and intimacy that Zembrzycki brings to the work – the sharing of the relationship between her and her Baba as they jointly explore their shared history – that is perhaps the most remarka-

ble aspect of *According to Baba*. Historians can learn a lot from this work.

**Michel S. Beaulieu**  
Lakehead University

## *William Henry Harrison and the Conquest of the Ohio Country*

By David Curtis Skaggs.

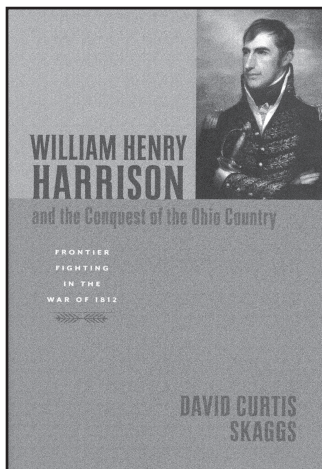
Baltimore; John Hopkins University Press, 2014. 303 pp. \$44.95 (U.S.) hard-cover. ISBN 978-1-42140-546-9 ([www.press.jhu.edu](http://www.press.jhu.edu))

William Henry Harrison has an undistinguished legacy as the ninth U.S. president, having died shortly after taking office. In this book, David Curtis Skaggs examines his career prior to that time, with emphasis on the battles of Tippecanoe and the Thames. Given his previous works related to the old Northwest (the region south of the upper Great Lakes), Skaggs is well versed on his topic.

From his early years, Harrison was driven by ambition and, as a young “peach-fuzzed, abstemious, gentrified and intellectually curious ensign” (p. 26), he stood out in an officer corps “filled with incompetent, intoxicated, illiterate, and ineffective men” (p. 8). Serving under “Mad” Anthony Wayne he gained valuable experience in frontier fighting, before turning to politics, becoming governor of Indiana Territory at the age of twenty-eight. In this role, he had to rationalize the “paradox” [in a national policy] of “honourable Native treatment” (p. 55) with his role in negotiating away millions of acres of their

land (p. 59). This relentless encroachment resulted in Tecumseh’s indignant response that as Native lands were held in common, they could only be given away by common consent. Harrison dealt with this threat by scattering Tecumseh’s followers at the battle of Tippecanoe and “For the following two years the struggle in the Ohio Country revolved around Harrison and Tecumseh” (p. 73), the consequence of “Indian intransigence, British connivance, and American expansion” (p. 32).

In 1812, Hull’s surrender of Detroit and Brock’s cession of Michigan Territory presented Harrison with “new opportunities” (p. 83) as commander of the Northwest Army. Despite two additional major reverses at the Raisin River (Frenchtown) and near Fort Meigs (Dudley’s defeat), Harrison persisted. But after the U.S. naval victory on Lake Erie, he roundly defeated the Anglo-Native force at the battle of the Thames where Tecumseh was killed. Although this first significant American land victory of



the war thrust Harrison into the national limelight, it also intensified the animosity of John Armstrong, secretary of war, prompting Harrison's resignation from the army and stalling his political career for years until he bounced back to gain the presidency.

Skaggs's book goes beyond previous biographies of Harrison by interpreting his actions through the principles of war – unity of command, concentration of force, inter-service co-operation, freedom of action and so on. In particular, “victory on land and sea depends on three components, logistics, logistics and logistics” (p. 115). The difficulties of concentrating resources in the wilderness were aggravated by the “imbecility and incompetence of the public agents and the villainy of the contractors” (p. 133). Logistics also became a strategic objective in Harrison's offensive strategy whereby he would systematically “deprive the tribesmen of homes, fields and storage facilities” (p. 126). Skaggs stresses logistics as vital to the British as well, “so long as they controlled the Great Lakes lifeline... but if they lost it, the difficulties of supply... would jeopardize their entire effort” (p. 126). Indeed, the American victory on Lake Erie, signified the end of Anglo-Native operations in this theatre. With Churchillian flair, Skaggs assesses Brock's initiative in the west: “Few generals have done so much with so few while at the same time placing at risk so many who stood to lose all” (p. 97). Given the outcomes, Tecumseh and Procter might agree.

The book is not without errors. Far from “assisting the Indians' military capabilities” after Tippecanoe (p. 80), the British drastically reduced their gunpowder allocations and Isaac Brock warned them to desist from hostilities as British aid would not be forthcoming. Hull did not surren-

der Detroit “without firing a shot” (p. 82) since several of his men were killed in the prior artillery exchange. No “agents of His Majesty's government... endorsed an attack of Fort Dearborn and its garrison” (p. 106) since they learned of it only after the fact. It was Colonel, not Captain (p. 137), Elliott who directed the Maumee foraging operation. It was the tribesmen, not the British, who “forbade the internment of the [Americans'] remains” at Frenchtown (p. 159). That Procter left no one “to ascertain American movements” (p. 205) is incorrect as he had detailed dragoons under Lt. Coleman to do just that. It was not rations that were captured in the bateaux (p. 206) but ammunition. Procter's strength figures on the battlefield were not “a self-serving underestimation” (p. 207) but the adjutant's morning state with an exact count of 450 men present. Nor does Harrison's report of 601 prisoners invalidate that figure (p. 207) since it includes aggregate numbers for the entire campaign. The British command correspondence and the extensive Procter court martial transcripts would have been useful in clarifying much of the foregoing.

On balance, this account is the most comprehensive view of William H. Harrison's military service to be had. As such, it unravels much of the complexity associated with American operations in the War of 1812, as traced through the actions of an ambitious patriot, the central figure associated with the consolidation of the American old Northwest. This book is recommended to a wide range of readership interested in the Anglo-American struggle in this region.

**Sandy Antal**

Independent scholar

Author of the award-winning *A Wampum Denied: Procter's War of 1812*