

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

A Mohawk Memoir from the War of 1812: John Norton —  
Teyoninhokarawen. By Carl Benn.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8m17b22v>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 46(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Mulford, Carla J

**Publication Date**

2023-04-04

**DOI**

10.17953/aicrj.46.1.reviews.mulford

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**A Mohawk Memoir from the War of 1812: John Norton–Teyoninhokarawen.** By Carl Benn. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 392 pages. \$42.95 paper; \$39.95 electronic.

In the past thirty years, scholars revisiting the War of 1812 have opened new perspectives on the conflicts, which historically have been overshadowed by accounts of the American Revolution and the American Civil War. One of the first was Donald Hickey in 1989 with *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, which examined the continental warfare from the vantage point of imperial military and political history. Jon Latimer's *1812: War with America* (2010) and Troy Bickham's *The Weight of Vengeance* (2012) conceived the war as part of a global conflict, pointing to the Napoleonic wars and their impact on European populations and the shifting balances of power in Europe, island nations, and maritime affairs. In *1812: The Navy's War* (2011), George C. Daughan studied bluewater losses and victories in the context of political strategy and the histories of European powers. Alan Taylor's *The Civil War of 1812* (2010) offered students and general readers a study that spoke to military and imperial motivations while speaking about the impact of the war on the lives of everyday people.

Among these scholars, Carl Benn stands alone for his focus on the military and social consequences of the war from the perspective and concerns of Indigenous peoples. In 1998, Benn argued in *The Iroquois in the War of 1812* for the significance of Indigenous stories, especially those of Teyoninhokarawen, the Mohawk name given to Major John Norton (Cherokee/Scot). His account details the difficulties faced by the Haudenosaunees—some of whom favored the British and some the Americans—in a war over which they had little control and a lot to lose. Indeed, Benn has consistently illuminated First Nations' struggles in this war. In addition to this monograph on the Haudenosaunees, Benn's insightful scholarly edition/handbook, *Native Memoirs from the War of 1812: Black Hawk and William Apess* (2014), offers two different perspectives revealing the complicated tangle of relations caused by settler colonialism and European empires. Black Hawk's and William Apess's accounts reveal the complexities and divisions among Native peoples as they made decisions about how to deal with or fend off military and settler intrusions. Because of significantly strained relations after the US-Sauk Treaty of 1804, Black Hawk, a leader of the then-independent Sauks, decided to ally with the British during the war. Black Hawk's story usefully reveals an Indigenous leader's perspective who at times worked with the British but with some frequency engaged in Indigenous operations against imperialist efforts. By contrast, William Apess, Pequot and Christian from a Native reserve in Connecticut, served in different military roles with the Americans. His memoir provides insight into the complicated subaltern position in conflict with pan-Native ideas. Benn's exhaustive research has enabled him to offer significant historical analyses that establish

a range of Indigenous perspectives on the war for readers, also making available to readers those Native voices associated with Native and imperial crises and claims in Native homelands. By considering the complicated efforts at self-determination that Indigenous peoples embraced as their lands were invaded, Benn enables us to reexamine imperialism and settler colonialism.

Since Benn's 1998 monograph examined John Norton's memoir, one might wonder why a separate edition of the memoir's contents related to the War of 1812 is necessary. Several reasons come to mind—Norton's layered heritage, the complicated cultural systems and conflicts among the Haudenosaunees, and the provenance of Norton's long manuscript, all issues Benn usefully touches upon in the volume's impressive scholarly apparatus. At more than 1,000 pages, Norton's manuscript is, unlike many of its kind from this era, unmediated by the voices of clerk, printer, or interpreter. As a result, as Benn recognizes, Norton's "vision" for his manuscript "as of 1816 remains whole, and the document tells us more about its author and his world than it would have had he revised and shortened it at the suggestion of his acquaintances, or had it gone through the hands of a Georgian-era editor to smooth its rougher components" (7).

Norton's mixed-race heritage and Indigenous/imperial perspectives make the memoir unique among first-person accounts. Benn clarified Norton's ancestry in an essay published a decade ago (*Ethnohistory*, 2012), information also appearing in this volume: John Norton was born in 1770 in Crail, Scotland, to a Scottish mother and Cherokee father. As a youth, his father had been taken to England in 1760 or 1761 when he was severely injured during a British raid on the Cherokees at Keowee. John Norton, Jr., was in Edinburgh and London in the early 1780s and then, with his father, set sail for America with a regiment of foot. By the late 1780s he had left service, seems to have lived in western New York among Cayugas, and then ventured into the Ohio country and the Grand River areas. He became supremely interested in the Natives' concerns across the years, especially with their efforts to repel American settlements. In the face of settler invasions, Norton grew concerned about the tensions between Native groups in the Ohio area (who wanted to attack both military and settlers) and the Haudenosaunees (who sought neutrality).

By the late 1790s Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant) took note of John Norton's skills with languages and arms, and called on Norton to work with him. Norton moved to the Canadian side of Lake Erie and, having petitioned the British War Department for land, settled there and served as an interpreter for the British while also working with Thayendanegea. By 1800, Norton was ready to leave any interest in British assistance behind. He wanted to move into the Ohio country, where Cherokees were congregating. In Benn's words, "The Cherokees realized that they shared cultural similarities as Iroquoians, even though their societies had developed separately over many centuries" (37). Brant eventually adopted Norton, naming him Teyoninhokarawen, which translates variously but can be taken to mean "one with an open heart" (36). Teyoninhokarawen became a war chief and during the War of 1812, he saw a significant amount of action during the fall of Detroit, the capture of Fort Niagara, and several additional battles (Queenston Heights, Fort George, Stoney Creek, Chippawa, and Lundy's Lane) and blockades (Fort George, Fort Erie).

A seasoned and charismatic leader, Teyoninhokarawen/John Norton found himself engaging in multiple military and cultural worlds, as the memoir attests. Deeply affected by the trauma faced by First Nations peoples, and even as he recorded events associated with their sometime friends, the British, Teyoninhokarawen forged a narrative revealing the complicated relationships between and among the Haudenosaunee groups and other First Nations peoples.

*A Mohawk Memoir from the War of 1812: John Norton–Teyoninhokarawen* is a significant achievement. The memoir had lain dormant until the Champlain Society published the complete manuscript in 1970; from this long (faulty) edition Benn has reviewed and edited the relevant materials associated with the War of 1812. Surrounding and providing context for John Norton's account, Benn writes a large narrative (about two-thirds of the book) explaining backgrounds, highlighting Norton's omissions, and providing military history. Benn's work is a gift to those seeking to better understand the varied First Nations perspectives on the militarization and settlement of eastern North America, as well as the War of 1812 between Americans and British and their respective Native allies.

*Carla J. Mulford*  
Pennsylvania State University