

# H-Net Reviews

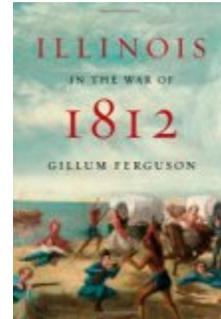
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gillum Ferguson. *Illinois in the War of 1812*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. xiii + 349 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03674-3.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Gillum Ferguson's *Illinois in the War of 1812* strives to fill a significant gap in the general understanding of this important conflict. In eleven chapters, approximately two hundred pages of text, the author describes the skirmishes between Indian warriors and their British allies on one side and American settlers, militiamen, and soldiers on the other within the borders of the Illinois Territory from 1811 to 1816. The narrative is at its best when Ferguson gives free rein to his poetic writing style. As a former state and federal attorney, he often sounds like a prosecutor summarizing his case to a jury in concise, well-crafted statements that capture his vision perfectly. But the narrative runs aground when Ferguson fails to connect the war in Illinois to the wider story of the War of 1812 playing out across North America and the world.

The opening two chapters, entitled "Morning" and "Evening," are the best in the book. Ferguson gives a sweeping look at the history of Illinois from ancient times to the outbreak of the War of 1812. His narrative provides a vivid sense of the rolling prairies of Illinois, the wildlife that long dwelt there, and the many tribes that had come and gone across this landscape for centuries. By the early nineteenth century, approximately twelve thousand Indians lived in Illinois, mainly Pottawatomi, Sac, Fox, Kickapoo, Winnebago, and Menominee, but they were slowly being crowded out by American settlers, numbered at thirteen thousand, who saw the potential for farming the rich black soil of the territory. As Ferguson explains, by 1810, "Illinois was on the verge of explosive growth that would bring civilization and prosperity," but from this bright future, the "Indians were excluded" (pp. 14, 16). Under pressure to continue purchasing manufactured goods, even as the animals whose furs they traded were dwindling, the Indians gave up the one

commodity they had in large quantities: land. By 1810, the tribes had sold most of Illinois along with Indiana and parts of Missouri to the American government. In desperation, they turned to Tecumseh and the Prophet as a last chance for survival, or as Ferguson explains in one of his most poetic lines, "Darkness was falling on the Indians of the old Northwest, but Tecumseh and the Prophet offered them one more day in the sun" (p. 29).

Having set the stage for the great conflict that was about to take place, Ferguson fails to connect the events that unfolded in Illinois to war beyond its borders in the remaining chapters. He writes in detail about every Indian attack on farms and settlements throughout the territory. But while his description of specific battles is excellent, he provides little analysis of exactly why everyone was fighting. Most significant, he does not explain the specific plans of Tecumseh to carve out an Indian state in the Old Northwest, which he planned to win with the help of his confederated warriors and the British in Canada. Similarly, he never analyzes what the British were fighting for in the war. Redcoats appear often and quite dramatically throughout the narrative, especially outside the walls of Fort Dearborn. But their presence seems incidental to the story since Ferguson never examines why Great Britain committed its forces to fighting in the Illinois Territory. Since the end of the American Revolution, the British had built Canada along the St. Lawrence River from Quebec to Ontario, and now, with their alliance to Tecumseh, there was a chance to extend its boundaries south of the Great Lakes through the creation of an Indian buffer state. Ferguson also stumbles in his portrayal of American leaders as inept in their response to the many raids of the Indians and British across Illinois. A closer reading of the correspondence of key

figures, especially William Henry Harrison, would have shown that these same American leaders clearly understood what was at stake. From the American perspective, the War of 1812 was a fight to the finish along the entire western frontier, including Illinois, to maintain the land granted to the United States by Great Britain in the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

Ferguson gives two clues in his work, one in the opening paragraph and one in the final paragraph, as to why he failed to weave the underlying causes of the War of 1812 into his narrative about Illinois. In the very first sentence of the book, he states that the period from 1789 to 1815 can be described as a time when Great Britain was fighting for its life. From this point forward, Ferguson never explores the motives of the British in supporting the Indians in Illinois and elsewhere during the War of 1812. When he finally must describe the peace negotiations at Ghent, he admits that the British demanded the creation of an Indian state in the Old Northwest but argues that they withdrew this request as soon as the Americans protested. In actuality, the negotiations at Ghent revolved around the creation of an Indian state in the Old Northwest because this was precisely what the tribes and their British allies had been fighting for since

Tippecanoe. The British negotiators had to withdraw their claim to territory south of the Great Lakes in large measure because of the fierce fighting that Ferguson describes in *Illinois in the War of 1812*. While the Indians and the British bested the Americans in the Old Northwest in the opening year of the war, they were ultimately defeated through the efforts of Harrison, and the three key figures that Ferguson describes, namely, Ninian Edwards, Benjamin Howard, and William Clark. The failure of the British in the Chesapeake and their defeat on Lake Champlain in 1814 also influenced the British negotiators to give up their demand for an Indian state in the western country. But Ferguson overlooks these facts, probably because he decided that the Indians were in a hopeless situation right from the start, regardless of what Tecumseh, his Indian followers, and his British allies tried to accomplish. As he states in his final paragraph, "What happened to the Indians was tragic, to be sure, but it was also inevitable, and the heroism of the generation of pioneers that subdued them must not be overshadowed by the darker aspects of the story" (p. 207). Between these twin poles—a blameless Great Britain and Indians doomed from the start—Ferguson's narrative of the War of 1812 in Illinois goes astray.

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