

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Black Hawk (1767-1838)

From *Life of MA-KA-TAI-ME-SHE-KIA-KIAK*

By the 1830's, for millions of white Americans, Indian Americans were sentimental heroes. Popular novels like Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) portrayed Indians as saintly and benevolent, and popular dramas like John Augustus Stone's *Metamora, or, the Last of the Wampanoags* (1828) had transformed feared and hated Indian leaders like King Philip into tragic heroes nobly defending their homelands. This sympathy in turn made Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policy highly controversial—supported by most frontier settlers but vigorously opposed by many easterners and religious groups.

Such was the context for the Black Hawk War (1832) and then the publication of Black Hawk's *Life of MA-KA-TAI-ME-SHE-KIA-KIAK* (1833), the first or nearly the first full-length Indian autobiography. Black Hawk, though defeated, captured, and imprisoned after the fifteen-week war, had later been taken east with other Sauk's, and huge crowds had turned out to see him and applaud his bravery. In August, 1833, following his return to the Sac and Fox Agency on Rock Island in the Mississippi, Black Hawk therefore called upon Antoine LeClair, the U.S. Interpreter on the Agency, and "express(ed) a great desire to have a History of his Life written and published, in order...that the people of the United States...might know the causes that had impelled him to act as he has done, and the principles by which he was governed" (3). Thus did LeClair "certify" in brief preface, swearing the book's accuracy, and similar accounts of the origin and purpose of the book are given in Black Hawk's dedication of it and the Advertisement of it by the editor, a newspaperman named John B. Patterson. Black Hawk was therefore not asked or paid to dictate his life history (as later happened with other Indian autobiographers). His story must have been heavily edited, for the translation is sometimes even embellished with phrases from English poetry, but the sixty-six-year-old Black Hawk did succeed in giving sympathetic white readers his motives and reasons for having fought and in "vindicate(ing) my character from misrepresentation" (7). David Brumble, in *American Indian Autobiography*, has recently argued that such "self-vindications" had long been a purpose of Indian autobiographical discourse. The medium and context were new, but the tradition of a defeated warrior justifying himself and his supporters was probably an old one.

The selections below are from near the middle of the book. Before it, Black Hawk tells of his ancestors, how the people came to live on Rock Island in the Mississippi River (near present-day Rock Island, Illinois), his early battles, and the injustice of an 1804 treaty which was an underlying cause of the war. In the remainder of the book he criticizes Keokuk, leader of the peace band, explains how the war began, and narrates its events. He also describes his journey east in 1833.

As the passage opens, it is 1816 on the U.S. calendar, and Black Hawk has just been forced to sign a treaty in St. Louis and then gone back to his village. The description of the cycles of village life, his sorrow over the deaths of his son and daughter, and the "difficulty with the loways" and how it was peacefully resolved all build respect for him and for the Sauk people. He is also eloquent in defending the Sauk attitude towards land. Therefore, in spite of the sentimental benevolence both sides attempted to express towards each other, the facts of white-Indian cultural differences cannot be ignored. This, and his emphasis on the difficulties of adjustment, place the text in the mainstream of what is now called ethnic autobiography. When other autobiographers of this period stressed their new national identity, Black Hawk stressed his tribal one, and his success in defending it makes this a compelling story.

Black Hawk died in Iowa, near the Des Moines River. The selection of his story below is from *Life of MA-KA-TAI-ME-SHE-KIA-KIAK or Black Hawk*, ed. J.B. Patterson (Boston, 1834). A modern edition, *Black Hawk, and Autobiography*, edited by Donald Jackson, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 1955.

Reading

Autobiography of Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, or Black Hawk
<http://archive.org/details/autobiographyofm07097gut>