



PENGUIN  CLASSICS

BLACK HAWK

*Life of Black Hawk,
or Mâ-ka-tai-me-she-kià-kiàk*

Dictated by Himself

Edited by J. GERALD KENNEDY

alterations: he supplied information in brackets; he italicized words for dramatic effect and added exclamation points for emphasis; he inserted entire phrases for coherence or continuity; and he alternately made Black Hawk sound like a simple primitive (he speaks of the White House as Jackson's "wigwam") and an educated gentleman who speaks of going "thither" and "thence," while bandying about words like "vicissitudes" (as in the improbable dedication to General Atkinson). But although the published version of the life strikes some obviously false notes—and none more jarring than when the illiterate Black Hawk quotes a famous line from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*—its content seems generally plausible to the modern reader.

Throughout, Black Hawk displays scruples as a narrator (at one point he refuses to describe an event he had not witnessed), and he disarmingly concedes that his late journey to the East has unsettled him, impairing his remembrance of things past: "My memory, however, is not very good, since my late visit to the white people. I have still a buzzing in my ears, from the noise—and may give some parts of my story out of place; but I will endeavor to be correct." His gestures of self-reproach as well as his blunt acknowledgment of Indian misdeeds give his testimony an ingenuous believability. And his account seems not to have been subjected to ideological tampering of the sort performed by editor James Seaver, who shaped the 1823 story of the Seneca "White Woman," Mary Jemison, by injecting his own Anglo-Saxon racial biases. Patterson apparently felt no such inclination, presenting Black Hawk's stinging remarks about the U.S. government and white chicanery in suitably vehement English. The editor's "Advertisement" to the volume moreover establishes Patterson's entire sympathy with Black Hawk's account of the Treaty of 1804. Thus, although Black Hawk's life story inevitably underwent distortion through translation and was perhaps given a more marketable, conciliatory tone, its compilers still seem to have worked conscientiously, within the limits of their own abilities, to make their English version faithful to the testimony of the defeated Sauk.

To explain the injustices perpetrated against his tribe, Black Hawk felt compelled to tell the full story of his people as he un-

derstood it through oral tradition. He begins, therefore, with a legend reaching back to the Canadian origins of his tribe, reconstructing the relationship between the Sauks and the French. He recalls how the Great Spirit had filled his great grandfather, Nanàmakee, with the belief that a white man would become his "father"; after the Indian had dreamed the same dream for four years, a French explorer indeed arrived bearing gifts and expressions of kindness toward the Sauks. According to tribal legend, the Frenchman (an unidentified early explorer) had himself been dreaming for four years, inspired by the Great Spirit to cross the sea and meet "a nation of people who had never yet seen a white man." The story thus introduces a native version of sacred national destiny and asserts Black Hawk's lineal connection to Nanàmakee, the Sauk designated chief by his father, the great chief Mukatàquet, thus establishing the corollary history of the tribal medicine bag that Black Hawk has carried through most of the late war. He traces the migration of his tribe into the area west of Lake Michigan some decades before his own birth, which he places in the year 1767.

With a respect for truth that generally restricts his narrative to events within his personal experience, Black Hawk succinctly recalls his coming of age and early tests of prowess. He proudly recalls tomahawking and scalping an Osage—Black Hawk's father "said nothing, but looked pleased"—and then with chilling candor lists his kills in subsequent clashes with the Osages, Cherokees, and other tribes. When he arrives at the episode that produced the Treaty of 1804, he briefly relies on the testimony of Quàshquàmè, one of four Sauks sent to St. Louis to negotiate the release of an imprisoned brave (who was, according to army records, shot trying to escape). But Quàshquàmè barely recalls discussion of the treaty, for the Sauks "had been drunk the greater part of the time they were in St. Louis."

The War of 1812 provides the next identifiable point of historical reference, and here Black Hawk explains that his tribe aligned itself with the British only because the Americans did not keep their promise about supplying goods. After the war, intertribal hostilities recur from time to time, yet violent

encounters with American soldiers and settlers increasingly dominate the narrative. The War of 1812 effectively ended the English-Indian alliance that had impeded western settlement, and American pioneers quickly flooded into the Illinois Territory, which achieved statehood by 1818. About these larger political matters, Black Hawk understood only their effects; but he realized unmistakably that the building of military forts, such as the construction of Fort Armstrong on Rock Island in 1816, prefigured the arrival of white settlers. That influx produced skirmishes with accelerating frequency, and government land sales in and around Saukenuk in 1829 ineluctably precipitated the crisis that erupted into the Black Hawk War.

But the reader concerned with chronology must look to the notes to discover these dates. Culturally indifferent to the white man's calendar, Black Hawk himself conveys only a general sense of passing time; seasons and years come and go, the speaker moves imperceptibly from youth to manhood to old age, and yet, apart from his late acknowledgment to LeClaire that he is now "growing old," he manifests little concern about time or mortality. What matters to him are changes within his family—he recalls the battle death of his father, whom he mourned for five years, and then later, the almost unbearable losses of a son and a daughter. The reticent Black Hawk says little about the unnamed "good woman," Asshewequa, or Singing Bird, who shared his life and raised his children, yet he declares categorically: "This is the only wife I ever had, or ever will have." He tells us much incidentally about tribal religion, mentioning revelations conveyed in dreams and portents, and at one point he alludes to a mysterious good spirit, with wings "ten times larger" than a swan's, living on Rock Island before the building of Fort Armstrong. His account of the origin of corn and beans resonates with many another native creation story. Black Hawk also expresses deep concern for the welfare of his tribe and for the preservation of its traditional way of life. Near the midpoint of his narrative, in fact, he depicts in some detail the cycle of native life in Saukenuk, and here the long past figures as a delicious golden age: "We always had

plenty—our children never cried with hunger, nor our people were never in want. Here our village had stood for more than a hundred years."

Black Hawk describes a collective existence occasionally perturbed by intertribal wars but annually renewed through customs and rituals—games, dances, feasts, and courtship practices. Framed by semiannual migrations for the winter hunt and summer planting, tribal life unfolds in harmony with nature and in obedience to the Great Spirit. By contrast, recent clashes with American settlers have brought catastrophic changes: "Now, we are as miserable as the howling, hungry wolf in the prairie!" Black Hawk concludes this suggestive passage by lamenting that past happiness as irrecoverable: "But these are the times that were!"

The restrained voice we hear in the narrative is that of an old man filled with pride, remorse, and anger. At times Black Hawk refrains from expressing indignation, as when he initially declines to enlarge on the injustices of the 1804 treaty. But elsewhere his bitterness erupts spontaneously, as when he interrupts his story to ask, "Why did the Great Spirit ever send the whites to this island, to drive us from our homes, and introduce among us *poisonous liquors, disease and death?*" In commenting on white complaints that their land claims around Rock Island were not being respected by the Indians, he likewise interjects sarcastically: "How smooth must be the language of the whites, when they can make right look like wrong, and wrong right." Insistently Black Hawk comments as an outside observer on the strange ways of the Americans. "The white people never appear to be satisfied," he remarks tellingly of the frontier greed for land. Like Apees in his 1833 essay, "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man," he holds up a mirror in which Anglo-American readers may see the contemptible practices of their compatriots. But whereas Apees protests the discrimination that denied New England Indians full citizenship as Americans, Black Hawk typically exposes the sheer barbarity of American frontiersmen, such as the murder of the Sauk boy whom he had adopted. After receiving permission from the commander of a local fort to hunt on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, this boy (the son of Black

passed close by me—so near that I could have killed him with my knife, but I let him pass. He kept the path towards the river; and had he went one step out of it, he must have come upon us, and would have been killed. He returned immediately, and entered the gate. I would now have rushed for the gate, and entered it with him, but I feared that our party was not prepared to follow me.

The gate opened again—four men came out, and went down to the river after wood. Whilst they were gone, another man came out, and walked towards the river—was fired upon and *killed* by a Winnebago. The others immediately ran for the fort, and two of them were killed. We then took shelter under the bank, out of reach of fire from the fort.

The firing now commenced from both parties and continued all day. I advised our party to set fire to the fort, and commenced preparing arrows for that purpose. At night we made the attempt, and succeeded to fire the buildings several times, but without effect, as the fire was always instantly extinguished.

The next day I took my rifle, and shot in two the cord by which they hoisted their flag, and prevented them from raising it again. We continued firing until all our ammunition was expended; and finding that we could not take the fort, returned home, having had one Winnebago killed, and one wounded, during the siege. I have since learned that the trader, who lived in the fort, wounded the Winnebago when he was *scalping* the first man that was killed! The Winnebago recovered, is now living, and is very friendly disposed towards the trader, believing him to be a *great brave!*

Soon after our return home, news reached us that a war was going to take place between the British and the Americans. Runners continued to arrive from different tribes, all confirming the report of the expected war. The British agent, Col. Dixon, was holding *talks* with, and making presents to, the different tribes.³⁰ I had not made up my mind whether to join the British, or remain neutral. *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!*

One of our people having killed a Frenchman at Prairie du Chien, the British took him prisoner, and said they would *shoot him* next day! His family were encamped a short distance below the mouth of the Ouisconsin. He begged for permission to go and see them that night, as he was *to die the next day!* They permitted him to go, after promising to return the next morning by sunrise. He visited his family, which consisted of a wife and six children. I can not describe their *meeting* and *parting*, to be understood by the whites; as it appears that their feelings are acted upon by certain rules laid down by their *preachers!*—whilst ours are governed only by the monitor within us. He parted from his wife and children, hurried through the prairie to the fort, and arrived in time! The soldiers were ready, and immediately marched out *and shot him down!* I visited his family, and by hunting and fishing, provided for them until they reached their relations.

Why did the Great Spirit ever send the whites to this island, to drive us from our homes, and introduce among us *poisonous liquors, disease and death?* They should have remained on the island where the Great Spirit first placed them. But I will proceed with my story. My memory, however, is not very good, since my late visit to the white people. I have still a buzzing in my ears, from the noise—and may give some parts of my story out of place; but I will endeavor to be correct.

Several of our chiefs and head men were called upon to go to Washington, to see their Great Father. They started; and during their absence, I went to Peoria, on the Illinois river, to see an old friend, a trader, to get his advice. He was a man that always told us the truth, and knew every thing that was going on.³¹ When I arrived at Peoria, he was not there, but had gone to Chicago. I visited the Pottowatomie villages, and then returned to Rock river.³² Soon after which, our friends returned from their visit to our Great Father—and related what had been said and done. Their Great Father (they said,) wished us, in the event of a war taking place with England, not to interfere on either side—but to remain neutral. He did not want our help—but wished us to hunt and support our families, and live in peace. He said that British traders would not be permitted to come on the Mississippi, to furnish us with goods—but we would be

well supplied by an American trader. Our chiefs then told him that the *British traders* always gave us *credits* in the fall, for guns, powder and goods, to enable us to hunt, and clothe our families. He replied that the trader at fort Madison would have plenty of goods—that we should go there in the fall, and he would supply us *on credit*, as the *British traders had done*. The party gave a good account of what they had seen, and the kind treatment they had received.³³

This information pleased us all very much. We all agreed to follow our Great Father's advice, and not interfere with the war. Our women were much pleased at this good news. Every thing went on cheerfully in our village. We resumed our pastimes of playing ball, horse racing, and dancing, which had been laid aside when this great war was first talked about.

We had fine crops of corn, which were now ripe—and our women were engaged in gathering it, and making *caches* to contain it. In a short time we were ready to start to fort Madison, to get our supply of goods, that we might proceed to our hunting grounds. We passed merrily down the river—all in high spirits. I had determined to spend the winter at my old favorite hunting ground, on Skunk river, and left part of my corn and meat at its mouth, to take up when I returned: others did the same. Next morning we arrived at the fort, and made our encampment. Myself and principal men paid a visit to the war chief at the fort. He received us kindly, and gave us some tobacco, pipes and provision. The trader came in, and we all rose and shook hands with him—for on him all our dependence was placed, to enable us to hunt, and thereby support our families. We waited a long time, expecting the trader would tell us that he had orders from our Great Father to supply us with goods—but he said nothing on the subject. I got up, and told him, in a short speech, what we had come for—and hoped he had plenty of goods to supply us—and told him that he should be well paid in the spring—and concluded, by informing him, that we had determined to follow our Great Father's advice, and not go to war.

He said that he was happy to hear that we had intended to remain at peace. That he had a large quantity of goods; and that, if we had made a good hunt, we would be well supplied: but remarked, that *he had received no instructions to furnish us any*

thing on credit!—nor could he give us any without receiving the pay for them on the spot!

We informed him what our Great Father had told our chiefs at Washington—and contended that he could supply us if he would—believing that *our Great Father always spoke the truth!* But the war chief said that the trader could not furnish us on credit—and that *he had received no instructions from our Great Father at Washington!* We left the fort dissatisfied, and went to our camp. What was now to be done, we knew not. We questioned the party that brought us the news from our Great Father, that we would get credit for our winter's supplies, at this place. They still told the same story, and insisted upon its truth. Few of us slept that night—all was gloom and discontent!

In the morning, a canoe was seen descending the river—it soon arrived, bearing an express, who brought intelligence that La Gutrie, a *British trader*, had landed at Rock Island with *two boats* loaded with goods—and requested us to come up immediately—because he had *good news* for us and a *variety of presents*. The express presented us with tobacco, pipes and wampum.³⁴

The news run through our camp like *fire in the prairie*. Our lodges were soon taken down, and all started for Rock Island. Here ended all hopes of our remaining at peace—having been *forced into WAR by being DECEIVED!*

Our party were not long in getting to Rock Island. When we came in sight, and saw tents pitched, we yelled, fired our guns, and commenced beating our drums. Guns were immediately fired at the island, returning our salute, and a *British flag hoisted!* We landed, and were cordially received by La Gutrie—and then smoked the pipe with him! After which he made a speech to us, that he had been sent by Colonel Dixon, and gave us a number of handsome presents—a large silk flag, and a keg of rum, and told us to retire—take some refreshments and rest ourselves, as he would have more to say to us on the next day.

We, accordingly, retired to our lodges (which had been put up in the mean time,) and spent the night. The next morning we called upon him, and told him that we wanted his two boats' load of goods to divide among our people—for which he should be well paid in the spring with furs and peltries. He

consented—told us to take them—and do as we pleased with them. Whilst our people were dividing the goods, he took me aside, and informed me that Col. Dixon was at Green Bay with twelve boats, loaded with goods, guns, and ammunition—and wished me to raise a party immediately and go to him. He said that our friend, the trader at Peoria, was collecting the Pottowatomies, and would be there before us. I communicated this information to my braves, and a party of two hundred warriors were soon collected and ready to depart.

I paid a visit to the lodge of an old friend, who had been the comrade of my youth, and had been in many war parties with me, but was now crippled, and no longer able to travel. He had a son that I had adopted as my own, who had hunted with me the two preceding winters. I wished my old friend to let him go with me. He objected, saying that he could not get his support if his son left him: that I, (who had always provided for him since he got lame,) would be gone, and he had no other dependence than his son. I offered to leave my son in his place—but he still refused. He said he did not like the war—he had been down the river, and had been well treated by the Americans, and could not fight against them. He had promised to winter near a white settler above Salt river, and must take his son with him. We parted. I soon concluded my arrangements, and started with my party to Green Bay. On our arrival there, we found a large encampment, and were well received by Dixon, and the war chiefs that were with him. He gave us plenty of provisions, tobacco and pipes, and said he would hold a council with us the next day.

In the encampment, I found a large number of Pottowatomies, Kickapoos, Ottawas and Winnebagoes.³⁵ I visited all their camps, and found them in high spirits. They had all received new guns, ammunition, and a variety of clothing. In the evening a messenger came to me to visit Col. Dixon. I went to his tent, in which were two other war chiefs, and an interpreter. He received me with a hearty shake of the hand, and presented me to the other chiefs, who shook my hand cordially, and seemed much pleased to see me. After I was seated, Col. Dixon said: "Gen. Black Hawk, I sent for you, to explain to you what we are going to do, and the reasons that have brought us here. Our

friend, La Gutrie, informs us in the letter you brought from him, what has lately taken place. You will now have to hold us fast by the hand. Your English father has found out that the Americans want to take your country from you—and has sent me and his braves to drive them back to their own country. He has, likewise, sent a large quantity of arms and ammunition—and we want all your warriors to join us."³⁶

He then placed a medal round my neck, and gave me a paper, (which I lost in the late war,) and a silk flag, saying—"You are to command all the braves that will leave here the day after tomorrow, to join our braves near Detroit."

I told him that I was very much disappointed—as I wanted to descend the Mississippi, and make war upon the settlements. He said he had been "ordered to lay the country waste around St. Louis³⁷—that he had been a trader on the Mississippi many years—had always been kindly treated, *and could not consent to send brave men to murder women and children!* That there were no soldiers there to fight; but where he was going to send us, there were a number of soldiers: and, if we defeated them, the Mississippi country should be ours!" I was pleased with this speech; it was spoken by a *brave!*

I inquired about my old friend, the trader, at Peoria, and observed, "that I expected he would have been here before me." He shook his head, and said he "had sent express after express to him, *and had offered him large sums of money,* to come, and bring all the Pottowatomies and Kickapoos with him; but he refused, saying, '*your British father had not money enough to induce him to join us!*' I have now laid a trap for him. I have sent *Gomo*, and a party of Indians, to take him prisoner, and bring him here alive. I expect him in a few days."³⁸

The next day, arms and ammunition, tomahawks, knives, and clothing, were given to my band. We had a great feast in the evening; and the morning following, I started with about *five hundred braves*, to join the British army. The British war chief accompanied us. We passed Chicago. The fort had been evacuated by the American soldiers, who had marched for fort Wayne. They were attacked a short distance from that fort, and *defeated!*³⁹ They had a considerable quantity of powder in the fort at Chicago, which they had *promised to the Indians;* but

the night before they marched, they destroyed it. I think it was thrown into the well! If they had fulfilled their word to the Indians, I think they would have gone safe.

On our arrival, I found that the Indians had several prisoners. I advised them to treat them well. We continued our march, and joined the British army below Detroit; and soon after had a fight!⁴⁰ The Americans fought well, and drove us with considerable loss! I was surprised at this, as I had been told that the *Americans could not fight!*

Our next movement was against a fortified place.⁴¹ I was stationed, with my braves, to prevent any person going to, or coming from the fort. I found two men taking care of cattle, and took them prisoners. I would not kill them, but delivered them to the British war chief. Soon after, several boats came down the river, full of American soldiers. They landed on the opposite side, took the British batteries, and pursued the soldiers that had left them. They went too far, without knowing the forces of the British, and were *defeated!* I hurried across the river, anxious for an opportunity to show the courage of my braves; but before we reached the ground, all was over! The British had taken many prisoners, *and the Indians were killing them!* I immediately put a stop to it, as I never thought it brave, but cowardly, to kill an unarmed and helpless enemy!⁴²

We remained here some time. I cannot detail what took place, as I was stationed, with my braves, in the woods. It appeared, however, that the British could not take this fort—for we were marched to another, some distance off. When we approached it, I found it a small *stockade*, and concluded that there were not many men in it. The British war chief sent a flag—Colonel Dixon carried it, and returned. He said a young war chief commanded, and would not give up *without fighting!* Dixon came to me and said, “you will see, to-morrow, how easily we will take that fort.” I was of opinion that they would take it; but when the morning came, I was *disappointed*. The British advanced—commenced an attack, and fought like braves; but by braves in the fort, were *defeated* and a great number killed!⁴³ The British army were making preparations to retreat. I was now tired of being with them—our success being bad, and having got no plunder. I determined on leaving them

and returning to Rock river, to see what had become of my wife and children, as I had not heard from them since I started. That night, I took about twenty of my braves, and left the British camp for home. We met no person on our journey until we reached the Illinois river. Here we found two lodges of Potawatomies. They received us very friendly, and gave us something to eat; and inquired about their friends that were with the British. They said there had been some fighting on the Illinois, and that my old friend, the trader at Peoria, had been taken prisoner! “By Gomo and his party?” I immediately inquired. They said, “no; but by the *Americans*, who came up with two boats. They took him and the French settlers, and then burnt the village of Peoria.”⁴⁴ They could give us no news respecting our people on Rock river. In three days more, we were in the vicinity of our village, when I discovered a smoke ascending from a hollow in the bluffs. I directed my party to proceed to the village, as I wished to go alone to the place from whence the smoke proceeded, to see who was there. I approached the spot, and when I came in view of the fire, saw a mat stretched, and an old man sitting under it in sorrow. At any other time, I would have turned away without disturbing him—knowing that he had come there to be *alone*, to humble himself before the Great Spirit, that he might take pity on him! I approached and seated myself beside him. He gave one look at me, and then fixed his eyes on the ground! *It was my old friend!* I anxiously inquired for his son, (my adopted child,) and what had befallen our people? My old comrade seemed scarcely alive—he must have fasted a long time. I lighted my pipe, and put it in his mouth. He eagerly drew a few puffs—cast up his eyes, which met mine, and recognized me. His eyes were glassy! He would again have fallen off into forgetfulness, had I not given him some water, which revived him. I again inquired, “what has befallen our people, and what has become of our son?”

In a feeble voice, he said: “Soon after your departure to join the British, I descended the river with a small party, to winter at the place I told you the white man had requested me to come to. When we arrived, I found a fort built, and the white family that had invited me to come and hunt near them, had removed to it. I then paid a visit to the fort, to tell the white people that myself