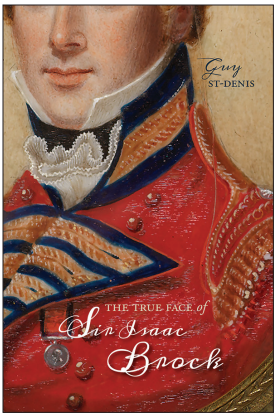

THE TRUE FACE OF SIR ISAAC BROCK
by Guy St-Denis

ISBN 978-1-77385-021-4

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

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8

In Coming Forward

At the same time that William Brock received his brother's personal effects in June of 1813, a monument to Sir Isaac Brock was being proposed for St. Paul's Cathedral.[1] As its main proponent, William Brock surely recognized the importance of having a good likeness from which to sculpt the hero's face.[2] Unfortunately, the portrait supplied by Major John B. Glegg was not up to snuff—possibly because it was done in profile (fig. 3). While such a portrait might have functioned perfectly well for a modest effigy, William Brock seems to have had his heart set on something more grandiose and in keeping with his late brother's elevation to the pantheon of British heroism. He might even have contemplated a larger-than-life statue, like many of the other monuments in St. Paul's. Whatever the case, William Brock was motivated by the national significance of his endeavour, and so he wrote to Major Glegg hoping to find a more suitable, or full-faced, portrait. Unfortunately, there was nothing better to be had from Canada.[3]

The monument proposal went ahead regardless, and in August of 1814 Richard Westmacott was commissioned to undertake the work.[4] This renowned British sculptor handily compensated for a lack of reference material by means of a highly romanticized neoclassical tableau.[5] With the central figure recumbent in death, eyes closed and head tilted sideways, Westmacott imagined Brock's likeness to conform with the classical motif of the dying warrior (figs 20, 20A). Indeed to anyone who knew Brock intimately, most notably his siblings, the sculpture was merely symbolic. However, given the difficulties Westmacott laboured under, it is unlikely that anyone in the Brock family would have expressed the slightest displeasure with his effort. The resulting memorial was still a great honour, even if it was not quite what William Brock had in mind. And

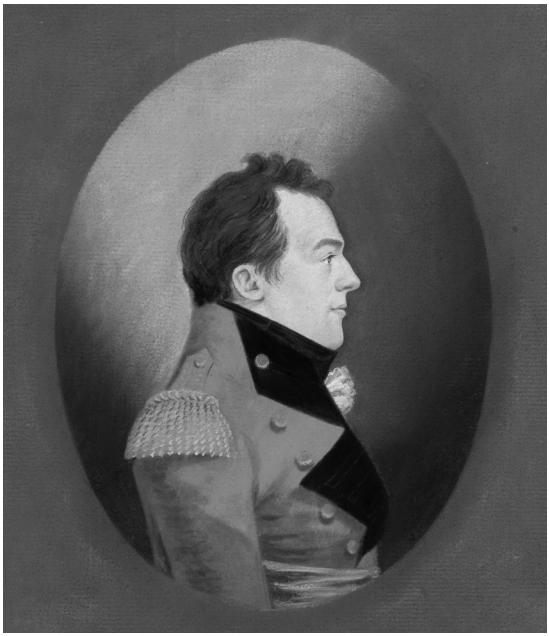

Figure 3.

Westmacott's rendition certainly comes closer to the truth than the statue adorning Brock's Monument on Queenston Heights, which could easily be mistaken for the American General Winfield Scott (mutton chops and all).[6]

During the course of my research into Brock's memorial, I could see how Westmacott had made good use of the profile portrait to represent the deceased hero as an alluring young man. However, based on the only two portraits known to be authentic, there is no disputing the fact that Brock was blessed with good looks. In the case of the miniature (fig. 27), he is shown as a handsome young ensign.[7] The profile portrait (fig. 3), which was painted some twenty-four or twenty-five years later, attests to the fact that Brock was still handsome as he approached middle age. But notwithstanding the strong visual evidence contained in these two portraits, I became curious to know how he fared in contemporary eyewitness accounts. There were precious few, however, and none of them actually referred to Brock as having been good-looking. In fact, one went so far as to call him ugly!

Figure 20.

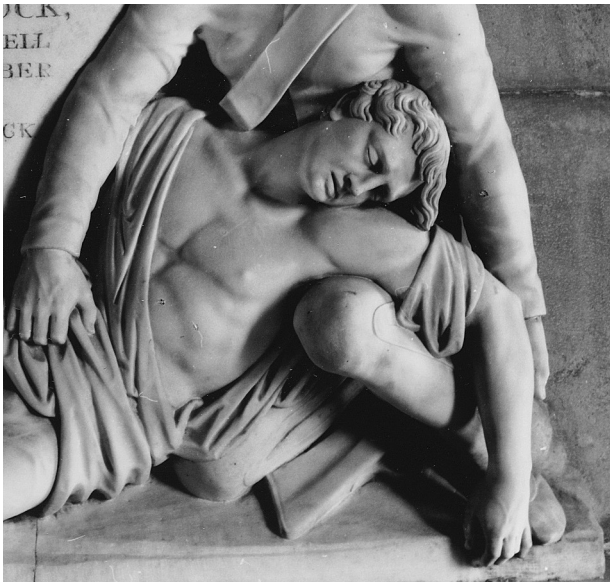

Figure 20a.

Figure 27.

Beginning with Major John Richardson, an aspiring Canadian author who also happened to be a veteran of the War of 1812, I hoped to get to the heart of the matter by establishing some basic facts about Brock's appearance. In 1842, Richardson remembered that Brock "was tall, stout, and inclining to corpulency." He was also "of fair and florid complexion, had a large forehead, full face, but not prominent features, rather small, greyish-blue eyes, with a very slight cast in one of them—small mouth, with a pleasing smile, and good teeth."[8] Tupper's own (and largely inferred) description corresponds with that of Major Richardson, except that it is more specific with regard to his uncle's height. "In stature he was tall (. . . about six feet two inches [1.88 m]), erect, athletic, and well-proportioned, although in his latter years his figure was perhaps too portly."[9] Another Canadian veteran of the War of 1812 was John Beverley Robinson, who went on to become chief justice of what is now Ontario. He supposed Brock to be "not quite so tall" as Tupper claimed, but was willing to concede the point.[10] The acting assistant quartermaster general of the American army at the surrender of Detroit was William Stanley Hatch, and his recollection was that Brock "must have been six feet three

or four inches [1.91 or 1.93 m] in height; very massive and large boned, though not fleshy, and apparently of immense muscular power."[11] George Sanderson, the captain of an Ohio volunteer company captured after the surrender, held a much less flattering view.[12] He saw in Brock "a heavily built man, about six feet three inches [1.91 m] in height, broad shoulders, large hips, and lame, walking with a cane." Moreover, one of his eyes, "the left one I think, was closed, and he was withal the ugliest officer I ever saw."[13]

Suspecting that Sanderson's observation may have been tainted by the spite of a sore loser, I decided to focus my attention on the similarities between his and the other descriptions of Brock. In the end, I was left with the impression of a tall, sturdy man whose body type allowed him to carry his weight well. And if Brock became heavy set towards middle age, then he did so without looking fat—as evidenced by his profile portrait.[14] This likeness also soundly refuted Sanderson's contention that Brock was ugly.[15] In attempting to give Sanderson the benefit of my doubt, I considered the possibility that Brock might have been confused with some other British officer who happened to be lame. While it was difficult to imagine such a mix-up, a case of mistaken identity emerged as the most plausible explanation.

The idea of a disfigured Brock was also employed to explain the direction of his pose in the profile portrait. The person responsible for this theory was William Kingsford, a Canadian historian. In 1886, he published an article outlining the most relevant sources then available for research into the nation's past. Kingsford also used the opportunity to acknowledge significant contributions to the study of Canadian history, and Lieutenant Governor John Beverley Robinson was applauded for his good work in commissioning the viceregal portraits for Government House in Toronto. It was during his interactions with the lieutenant governor that Kingsford became aware of the original profile portrait (fig. 3), and a possible secret meaning behind Brock's pose. As Kingsford related in his article, it involved "some scar or mark on the face" which was hidden by having Brock look to the right.[16] While this interpretation might seem suspiciously similar to Sanderson's description, it appears to have originated with the lieutenant governor himself. At any rate, there is no evidence to suggest that the other side of Brock's face was marred or in any way less attractive.[17]

Although I concluded that Brock was uniformly good-looking, I could see how a sculptor like Westmacott might have been disappointed with the profile portrait. It was hardly adequate to the task of carving a three-dimensional statue, which perhaps explains why it was regarded as "no good." This was the same unfortunate attitude that Ferdinand Brock Tupper had taken to extremes. Yet, there is absolutely nothing to indicate that anyone else in Brock's family—including Brock for that matter—thought ill of the profile portrait. Having come to this realization, my next concern became one of provenance.

William Brock retained the profile portrait until his death in December of 1819.[18] It then passed to his brother, Irving Brock, but the particulars of this bequest are unknown.[19] Although William Brock left a will, he made no provision for the portrait.[20] However, as his widow (the former Miss Sarah Maria Putt) was the sole beneficiary, she may have carried out her husband's last wishes by giving the portrait to her brother-in-law. There is also the possibility that William Brock made a gift of the portrait before he died. This much is certain: Irving Brock was the next owner of the profile portrait. Like his brother before him, Irving Brock made no provision for its disposal, at least not in his will.[21] But according to Miss Henrietta Tupper, he bequeathed the portrait to his nephew, Henry Tupper of Guernsey. If so, it was likely Irving Brock's widow, Mrs. Frances (Longley) Brock, who arranged for the bequest after her husband's death in 1838.[22] And there is no reason to suspect that Henry Tupper did not inherit the portrait, just as Miss Tupper claimed.[23] After all, her source was Henry Tupper's widow (formerly Miss Mary Ann Collings), and who better to have known how the portrait came to be his property? Mrs. Tupper owned the profile portrait after her husband's death in 1875, and it was still in her possession when the Robinsons began making their enquiries six years later.[24]

My research had come full circle, and considering that two centuries had passed since Brock sat for his profile portrait, I congratulated myself on having accomplished all of my goals—and then some. But my smug attitude was short-lived, especially once I began to feel the necessity of bringing the record forward. It was then that a certain fiasco came to mind.

Early in 2009, the Weir Foundation of Queenston, Ontario began an urgent fundraising campaign for the purchase of Gerrit Schipper's

profile portrait of Brock (fig. 3). It had been offered to the foundation in December of the previous year by Captain Mellish's son, Nicholas T.L. Mellish.[25] Included was Philip Jean's miniature of Brock as a young ensign (fig. 27). The asking price for the pair was a whopping £70,000, which was calculated as follows: £40,000 for Schipper's profile portrait, and £30,000 for Jean's miniature. While the foundation was eager to have both portraits for the RiverBrink Art Museum, its acquisitions budget fell short of the valuations Nicholas Mellish placed on them. Taking a chance, however, the foundation countered with an offer of £60,000, which was quickly accepted. Despite a tight payment deadline, which was set to expire less than two months later at the end of the February 2009, the foundation's executive believed there was ample time to raise the necessary funds. But Mellish was becoming anxious to finalize the sale, and in the second week of February he reopened negotiations with the Weir Foundation by lowering the price to £50,000.[26] There was a sizeable catch, however.

The foundation now had just ten days to come up with what amounted to an estimated $90,000 CAD.[27] A public appeal for financial assistance was immediately launched. But even with the many contributions received, which totalled almost $83,000 in very short order, it was all for naught. With just a few days before the new deadline, the foundation was informed that the portraits had been sold to the Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery.[28] Mellish had sweetened the deal by throwing in the miniature of John Brock as a lieutenant in the 8th (or King's) Regiment (fig. 25), and he let all three portraits go for the drastically reduced price of £36,000.[29] The Canadian equivalent was approximately $64,500, or about $18,500 less than the nearly $83,000 already raised by the Weir Foundation when Mellish reneged.[30] This outcome was extremely frustrating for everyone who wanted to see the profile portrait put on permanent display in Queenston, and it hearkened back to an incident almost half a century earlier.

In January of 1964, Captain Mellish received an extraordinary letter from Canada. It was written by a lawyer in London, Ontario, who wanted to know if the captain would be interested in "disposing" of Sir Isaac Brock's portrait "presently or at some time in the future." The lawyer was Samuel E. Weir, and he had a particular reason for wanting the profile portrait: "I am collecting for a prospective museum of Canadiana on the

Figure 25.

Niagara River at Queenston, just a few hundred yards from the spot where Brock was killed. The building is now under construction. It will be used by me as a residence until the museum is finally set up, which I expect will be at the time of my death."[31] As Weir further elaborated, it was "probably the most suitable place in the world for this Portrait," and based on this assessment, Captain Mellish was expected to agree.[32] It was an incredibly tactless letter, and one that was all too typical of its author.

Sam Weir was a large, overbearing man whose blunt manner did nothing to endear him to most of the people he met.[33] The severity of these traits showed no signs of moderating as the years advanced—nor did his passion for fine art, rare books, and choice antiques. Weir also had a deep interest in Canadian history, especially the War of 1812 and the Battle of Queenston Heights.[34] Thus, when it came time for him to think about giving up his legal practice, Weir decided to relocate to the sleepy little village of Queenston, Ontario. The retirement he envisioned began to take shape in the early 1960s, with the construction of a colonial style house on the Niagara River named, appropriately enough, River Brink.[35] It was really a museum in the making, and Weir was its sole benefactor. By early 1964, it occurred to the aging lawyer that River Brink should have a portrait of

Sir Isaac Brock—and preferably the original. Somehow or other, he knew there was such a painting. He also knew that it was owned by a Captain Mellish of St. Peter Port in Guernsey. This was all the introduction Weir needed before getting down to business.[36] His letter of enquiry, however, read more like a demand for terms.

Captain Mellish wasted little time in posting his reply. Trusting that the lawyer from Canada would respect his decision, the captain explained that he valued the portrait "very highly indeed," and so he did not feel he would want to "dispose of it either now or in the future."[37] The captain's diplomacy seemed to disarm the brusque old lawyer for a time, but then Weir came up with a plan B. "As you don't feel that you would part with it," he wrote back, "I venture to ask if you would allow me to engage somebody to make a copy of it? I should think there would be an Artist available in Guernsey capable of doing it."[38] Captain Mellish was more than happy to comply with this request, but he also believed a photograph of the portrait would serve the same purpose, and he felt confident that Weir would find one in Ottawa. "I should be glad to know your reaction to this suggestion," the captain added, "and if you take it up, whether or not you have any success."[39] But there were no more letters from Canada. Weir let the matter drop, preferring instead to devote his energies to other, less problematic, acquisitions.

In 1971, Weir finally realized his dream of living in Queenston by completing a gradual move to River Brink, which he then maintained as his principal residence for the rest of his life.[40] After his death in January of 1981, there was a remarkable transformation of the curmudgeonly lawyer's reputation—from misanthrope to philanthrope.[41] This redemption came about through the posthumous donation of his impressive art collection to the people of Ontario.[42] It was exceedingly generous; unfortunately, Weir's gift did not include the likeness of Sir Isaac Brock . . . until an old friend took matters into his own hands.

F. Eugene LaBrie first encountered Sam Weir just after the Second World War, while lecturing in law at the University of Toronto. Despite Weir's long-established career as a barrister and solicitor (having graduated from the Ontario law school in 1920), he had not yet earned a law degree and he was determined to enhance his legal credentials.[43] It was not to be, however, as ill health, the long commute, and a heavy workload forced

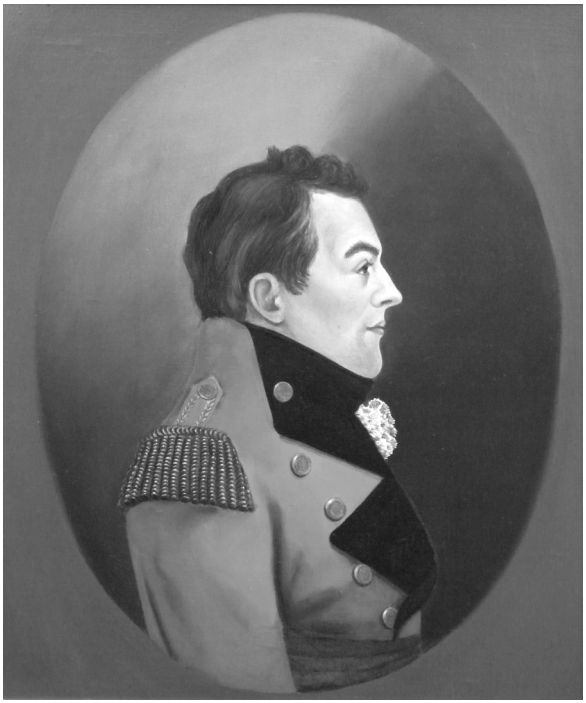

Figure 35.

him to abandon his studies—but not before he and LaBrie became good friends.[44] In time, LaBrie took on the additional roles of trusted advisor, close confidant, and finally chairman of the Weir Foundation. And as the person most familiar with Weir's vision for River Brink, LaBrie took it upon himself to obtain a copy of Brock's profile portrait, which he knew had been originally intended but never acted upon. He also planned for a second copy, which would go to Brock University as a donation (fig. 35).[45] Captain Mellish graciously consented to having the portrait photographed, and by the spring of 1984 LaBrie was ready to go in search of an artist.[46]

Someone at the National Portrait Gallery in London recommended Philippa Abrahams.[47] As an art conservator specializing in historical painting techniques, she was thought to be well qualified for the job. Abrahams welcomed the commission, which called for the two portraits to be done in oils as opposed to the pastels of the original. In addition to the medium, the size of the copies was also modified. Abrahams was instructed to make

them nearly three times larger, or about twenty-four by twenty inches (61 x 50.8 cm).[48] And while she was encouraged to use her best judgement in representing the uniform, Brock's face was not to be altered. It had to be an exact reproduction. There was one other stipulation. Abrahams had one year in which to finish the portraits. Working expeditiously and using the photographs provided by LaBrie, she was able to finish the commission ahead of the deadline in August of 1985.[49]

Although Weir's intention to grace the walls of River Brink with Brock's likeness was finally realized, it was not before LaBrie himself tried to strike his own deal to purchase the original portrait. But it was to no avail. Captain Mellish valued the profile portrait far too much. Kosche hit the same brick wall in September of 1984, when he casually asked if the captain might consider the possibility of a sale.[50] Kosche was acting on behalf of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, whose executive were looking for ways in which to mark the bicentennial of Ontario's founding in 1784.[51] Even though Kosche knew that Captain Mellish had already decided to pass the portrait on to his son, he saw no harm in testing the waters. In his reply, Captain Mellish mentioned that a Mr. LaBrie had been making overtures about buying the portrait for the past two years, and that he did so in his capacity as chairman of the Weir Foundation. But whether it was the Weir Foundation or the Ontario Heritage Foundation, the captain was still not prepared to entertain the idea of a sale . . . unless, of course, the interested party was willing to hand over £250,000![52]

This grossly inflated price was derived—in part—from LaBrie's unguarded remark that the profile portrait was a national treasure.[53] It is no wonder that Captain Mellish was impressed with the idea that his portrait of Brock was historically significant and therefore extremely valuable.[54] But not even he believed it to be worth a quarter of a million pounds. The captain simply did not wish to part with a prized family heirloom, and by insisting on a small fortune, he was able to deflect irksome enquiries. This strategy certainly had the desired effect on the executive of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, who were quick to acknowledge that they lacked the means for such an extravagant purchase.[55] The same held true for the Weir Foundation. But like Sam Weir before him, Eugene LaBrie had a plan B.

While the Abrahams copy of Brock's profile portrait was meant to put the finishing touch on the collection at RiverBrink, it was a poor substitute

for the original. Over time, this pastiche became a constant reminder of what was still lacking in Weir's vision for his museum. After LaBrie's replacement as chairman of the Weir Foundation and the passage of nearly twenty-five years, there was a commendable attempt to repatriate what is arguably a Canadian work of art. That it failed is unfortunate, but every cloud has a silver lining. Soon after the Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery acquired the profile portrait, it was given a much-needed restoration and then generously lent to RiverBrink for a major exhibition commemorating the War of 1812.[56] This kind gesture did much to remove the sting of a missed opportunity.