

Guy St-Denis. *The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018. Pp. 338.

In *The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock*, Guy St-Denis explores the quest, primarily by others but also by him, to identify an accurate portrait of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, the “Hero of Upper Canada,” who met an untimely if somewhat glorious death at Queenston Heights in October 1812. In the search for authenticity, St-Denis explores the provenance and accuracy of what can only be described as a plethora of likenesses of the famous general or, in some cases, others mistakenly thought to be him. Because it is so well-written and researched, using as it does a range of national and international archival sources, it is fair to say that this book is now the definitive work on Brock portraiture and, barring any new major revelation, will remain so for the foreseeable future.

*True Face* begins in the early 1880s with the search by the new lieutenant-governor of Ontario, John Beverley Robinson, for an authentic likeness of Brock. He predicated his search on the desire to commission an official portrait of the late general that might be added to a growing collection of pictures depicting former vice-regal representatives, “a Gallery of Governors, as it were” (p. 7). The story then transitions to the attempt in the 1890s by two ladies of the Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Toronto, Miss Agnes FitzGibbon and Miss Sara Mickle, to prove that a recently acquired miniature portrait of a youthful officer in fact depicted Brock. Believing it to portray him early in his military career when a junior officer, the image was duly included in *The Cabot Calendar*, an illustrated work by both women that listed important events in Canadian history by month.<sup>1</sup> FitzGibbon and Mickle were so convinced of the correctness of their cause that they sought all manner of evidence to support a positive attribution while at the same time endeavouring to silence critics and dissenters who cast doubt on the identity of the sitter. Unfortunately for these two women, their “attitude towards historical research had more to do with proving a point than seeking the truth” (pp. 167-68). Jumping ahead to the late 1970s and early 80s, the story resumes with Ludwig Kosche, the Canadian War Museum’s

<sup>1</sup> Compiled by Sara Mickle, assisted by Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, with drawings by M. Cary McConnell and Clara FitzGerald, *The Cabot Calendar* (Toronto: Toronto Lithographing Co., c. 1896).

librarian, becoming interested in Brock portraiture as he researched the coatee worn at the time of the general's death.<sup>2</sup> As an aside, Kosche also performed much of the background research on Hitler's black Mercedes Benz limousine.<sup>3</sup> The uniform, naturally, is one of the museum's most prized artifacts, while the car is perhaps one of its most controversial. St-Denis's own investigation, which builds upon and modifies the excellent and indeed ground-breaking work of Kosche, concludes the book. Of note, he successfully dates and attributes a portrait now taken to be the true face of Sir Isaac Brock; incidentally, it was this very image that served as the starting point for George Berthon, the Toronto artist who painted the official portrait for Robinson's burgeoning gallery. After a complex and convoluted path, the story comes full circle.

With an extremely large cast of characters, including professional curators, soldiers, extended family members and amateur historians, amongst a range of others, such a tale as this is perhaps bound to be anything but straightforward and simple. To be sure, locating an authentic and accurate portrait of the general was no easy task given that the powerful tide of family lore, a host of personalities each with their own agenda and scholars of various bent and quality all compounded the search in one way or another. That a true portrait was ultimately identified, however, speaks to the investigative powers of St-Denis and many of his predecessors. The book is very much a detective story of the first order.

Primarily art history—it is by no means a biography of Brock although details from his life are helpfully scattered throughout—*True Face* reflects some basic truths about the art world: that opinions differ; that reputations and money are often at stake; that provenance is key (but sometimes is untrustworthy); that attributions of either the sitter or artist are often open to revision; that research into pieces of art must be sound and credible; and that the smallest detail in a picture (like buttons in this case!) may be essential to its identification. St-Denis illuminates these themes, each in their own way, through his discussion of Brock portraiture.

*True Face* is richly illustrated with both colour and black and white images, which is entirely fitting and useful since the story considers numerous likenesses, only some of which are actually of

<sup>2</sup> Brock's coat, 19670070-009, Canadian War Museum [CWM].

<sup>3</sup> Hitler's car, 19700158-001, CWM.

Brock. For his part, St-Denis does not play the role of art critic since he reserves comment on the quality of the various compositions about which he writes so powerfully. While his views on each picture are not necessary for a full appreciation of the story, it would have been interesting to know his personal opinions on the pieces that form linchpins in his narrative since they are absolutely central to his discussion.

*The True Face of Sir Isaac Brock* is a powerful example of the nexus between professional scholarship and heroic iconography. Impeccably researched and presented, it advances our understanding of the life of Brock and the artistic world with which he sometimes came into contact in early nineteenth-century Canada. Guy St-Denis is certainly not the first to investigate the historical narrative underlying a portrait or collection of images, but this book is a wonderful example of the genre and proof that engaging studies can breathe life into what might otherwise be a dry and arcane subject.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Stephanie Nolen, *Shakespeare's Face* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002); and Alan McNairn, *Behold the Hero: General Wolfe & the Arts in the Eighteenth Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).