

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

TECUMSEH AND THE NEW MADRID EARTHQUAKES OF 1811-12

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Tecumseh (or, Tecumthe), the renowned Shawnee leader, and his brother Tenskwatawa, known as the Prophet, led an important renewal or revitalization movement among Native Americans in the Ohio River valley that spread through the eastern United States and into Canada.¹ In 1805 and 1806, their work became intertribal in scope after the younger Tenskwatawa had a series of visions that included his foretelling of a solar eclipse. Other natural phenomena seemed discernable by the two brothers especially the massive earthquakes that occurred in the Mississippi River valley near New Madrid (in Missouri Territory) during the Winter of 1811-12. This convergence of a notable and widespread cataclysmic phenomenon with Shawnee predictive prophecy, while commonly dismissed as myth or folklore by those who have thought the link between later records (or memory) and the events to be unverifiable, certainly highlighted influential aspects of Native American cosmology and religion in light of and as a response to the unending European incursions.

Unlike Europeans, who had been “enlightened” by empirical and scientific views of the universe, natives viewed themselves as subordinate to nature and not in control of it. They

¹The movement of the Shawnee brothers was one of many among Native Americans at that time. For an excellent overview, see Lee Irwin, “Freedom, Law and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 35-55.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

existed symbiotically with the natural world, and they drew strength from its power and mystery. By observation and meditation, they learned meaningful lessons that effected their cosmology (or beliefs about the world), their language and thought patterns, and their destiny. In a real sense, they and their world were one, so much so that predictions (particularly by holy people) about unusual or infrequent natural phenomena did not seem odd or strange.²

The pioneer descendants of Christian Europeans, who generally disdained the Indians as savages, uncivilized, and in need of true religion, judged them in their natural state as incapable of any genuine religious experience. As a consequence, the Christian invaders (i.e., from the Indian perspective), who produced most of the written records of these events, held a decided prejudice against the legitimacy of predictive prophecy among the natives, including the Shawnee. In a brief section about Tenskwatawa (or, Tenskwautawaw), Thomas L. McKenney described the justification of his bias in the following way:

We have received, through the politeness of a friend, a narrative of the history of these celebrated Indians, dictated by the Prophet himself, and accurately written down at the moment. It is valuable as a curious piece of autobiography, coming from an unlettered savage, of a race remarkable for tenacity of memory, and for the fidelity with which they preserve and transmit their traditions, among themselves; while it is to be received with great allowance, in consequence of the habit of exaggeration which marks the communications of that people to strangers. In their intercourse with each other, truth

²See Joel W. Martin, *The Land Looks After Us: A History of Native American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a good comparison with Christian theology, see Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001). For the intricacies of the cosmology of a specific tribe, see Raven Hall, *The Cherokee Sacred Calendar: A Handbook of the Ancient Native American Tradition* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2000).

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

is esteemed and practised; but, with the exception of a few high minded men, little reliance is to be placed upon any statement made by an Indian to a white man. The same code which inculcates an inviolable faith among themselves, justifies any deception towards an enemy, or one of an alien race, for which a sufficient motive may be held out. . . . With this prefatory caution, we proceed to give the story of Tenskwautawaw, as related by himself—compiled, however, in our own language, from the loose memoranda of the original transcriber.³

From a posture of white condescension toward natives, McKenney allowed strict veraciousness of Indians among their own kind, but he could not rise above a belief in their habitual dissimulation when interacting with whites. McKenney’s Eurocentric vision, with its criteria of what constituted civilization and education, certainly blinded McKenney and many of his contemporaries from seeing native culture and religion on its own terms.

In remarks about Tecumseh, McKenney similarly emphasized the leader’s mendacity and rationalized this viewpoint on the basis of what he felt to be native superstition. He concluded:

Tecumthe was not only bold and eloquent, but sagacious and subtle; and he determined to appeal to the prejudices, as well as the reasons, of his race. The Indians are very superstitious; vague as their notions are, respecting the Deity, they believe in the existence of a *Great Spirit*, to whom they look up with great fear and reverence; and artful men have, from time to time, appeared among them, who have swayed their credulous minds, by means of pretended revelations from Heaven. Seizing upon this trait of the Indian character, the crafty projector of this great revolution, prepared his brother Tenskwautawaw, or Ellsquatawa . . . to assume the character of a Prophet; and, about the year 1806, the latter began to have dreams, and to deliver predictions.⁴

³Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of Ninety-Five of 120 Principal Chiefs from the Indian Tribes of North America* (Philadelphia: Frederick W. Greenough, 1838), 37.

⁴*Ibid.*, 42.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

With such explanations, McKenney could not possibly understand correctly the nuances and mysteries of native beliefs and practices. Ironically, in taking this kind of approach, those recorders of early nineteenth-century natives like McKenney have made their own testimony highly suspect. Contrarily, this brief essay will examine Tecumseh’s prediction of the New Madrid earthquakes on its own merits in order to ascertain what it reveals about native prophecy and fulfillment (i.e., religion), native beliefs concerning the natural world (i.e., cosmology), and native traditions and memory (i.e., history).

From December 1811 through February 1812, major earthquakes occurred along the Mississippi River valley near New Madrid in what was then Missouri Territory. The immediate locale of the earthquakes roughly extended to five states—Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Illinois. In the early 1800s, the area west of the Mississippi, part of the Louisiana Purchase, had been designated Missouri Territory. The area east of the Mississippi had been claimed as early as 1784 and 1790 by Virginia and North Carolina, respectively. But the land belonged to the Chickasaws until they ceded in 1818 what now forms western Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky.⁵ The quakes, that began prior to daybreak on 16 December 1811, rocked a sparsely populated area, but their magnitude shook the entire region and caused disturbances as

⁵See Sam B. Hilliard, “A Robust New Nation, 1783-1820,” *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*, eds. Robert D. Mitchell and Paul A. Groves (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 149-171; Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 76-79.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

far away as the eastern coast of the United States, southern Canada, and northern Mexico. Their reach and consequence was extensive and sparked amazing reports of the catastrophic tremors.⁶

William Pierce, apparently an eyewitness who traveled on the Mississippi River at the time of the earthquakes, penned a report that he dispatched to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post* on Christmas Day from Big Prairie, Arkansas. He found it impossible to describe recent events in ordinary language, and so noted:

Tremendous and uninterrupted explosions, resembling a discharge of artillery were heard. . . . There was a volcanic discharge of combustible matter to great heights, and incessant rumbling was heard below, and the bed of the river was excessively agitated, whilst the water assumed a turbid and boiling appearance. . . . Never was a scene more replete with terrific threatenings of death. . . . We contemplated in mute astonishment a scene which completely beggars description, and of which the most glowing imagination is inadequate to form a picture.⁷

Pierce also related the panic of water fowl, the terror of the Indians, and the confusion of locals.

He summarized the whole episode in language of cosmic disturbance, “All nature indeed seemed to sympathize in the commotion which agitated the earth. The sun rarely shot a ray through the

⁶See James Lal Penick, Jr., *The New Madrid Earthquakes*, rev. ed. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 1-14; Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 108-138.

⁷William Leigh Pierce, letter to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post*, 25 December 1811, *An Account of the Great Earthquakes, in the Western States, particularly on the Mississippi River; December 16-23, 1811* (Newburyport, Massachusetts: Thomas & Whipple, 1812), 6.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

heavens, the sky was clouded, and a dreary darkness brooded over the whole face of creation; the stars were encircled with a pale light, and the comet appeared hazy and dim.”⁸

Other such fantastic accounts found their way into the printed literature, and the gravity of the cataclysmic upheavals impressed subsequent travelers to the region. Charles Latrobe, a London-born Moravian gentleman who visited the United States in 1832, commented in his travelogue on portents like the splendid comet, rivers flooding, unprecedented sickness, and a spirit of restlessness that “combined to make the year 1811 the Annus Mirabilis of the West.”⁹ His account of the quakes, in retrospect, personified the earth as alive, distressed, and hungry. Latrobe concluded, “It was at this very epoch in which so many natural phenomena were combining to spread wonder and awe, that man too, in the exercise of that power with which the Creator has endowed him, was making his first essay in that region.”¹⁰ Apparently, he regarded the pangs of the earth and the portents in the heavens as providential signs for the westward trek of white explorers and settlers.

As Pierce had indicated, the earthquakes frightened Indians in the region and, no doubt, killed many. But the upheaval was not completely unexpected among the natives. Over two

⁸Ibid., 12.

⁹Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833*, Vol. 1 (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835), 102. Compare John D. W. Guice, “1811-Year of Wonders in the Mississippi Territory,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 167-170.

¹⁰Latrobe, *Rambler in North America*, 103.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

months earlier, predictions of the powerful earthquakes came from a non-Christian source—the Shawnee chief Tecumseh. In his quest to persuade the southern tribes to confederate and repel the ever encroaching whites, the great orator visited the grand council of the Creek Nation that had assembled at Tuckhabatchee on the Tallapoosa River.¹¹ His attempts to persuade Big Warrior, principal chief of the Upper Creeks, met with resistance. After lengthy and emotional appeals, Big Warrior consistently refused to pledge his people in confederation. Angrily, Tecumseh finally shouted at the old chief, “Your blood is white! . . . You do not believe the Great Spirit has sent me. You shall know. I leave Tuckhabatchee directly and shall go . . . to Detroit. When I arrive there, I will stamp on the ground with my foot, and shake down every house in Tuckhabatchee!”¹²

¹¹On Tecumseh’s six-month tour from August 1811 to January 1812, generally, see John Sugden, “Early Pan-Indianism: Tecumseh’s Tour of the Indian Country, 1811-1812,” *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 273-304.

What effect Tecumseh’s tour of the southern tribes had on the Cherokees, their response to the New Madrid earthquakes, and the growth of the Ghost Dance movement has been much debated. See William G. McLoughlin, “New Angles of Vision on the Cherokee Ghost Dance Movement of 1811-1812,” *American Indian Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1979): 317-345; William G. McLoughlin, “Ghost Dance Movements: Some Thoughts on Definition Based on Cherokee History,” *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 27; Michelene E. Pesantubbee, “When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811-12,” *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 301-317; and Russell Thornton, “Boundary Dissolution and Revitalization Movements: The Case of the Nineteenth Century Cherokees,” *Ethnohistory* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 366-367.

¹²Quoted in Allan W. Eckert, *The Frontiersman: A Narrative* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 527-528. See too the retelling of the event by Glenn Tucker, *Tecumseh: Vision of Glory* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1956), 206-211; and Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 1-5.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

When the Great Comet of 1811 appeared a short time later, Creeks remembered other words from Tecumseh about his “strong arm of fire, which will stretch across the sky.”¹³ In December, when the earth quaked and houses in their villages collapsed, they knew that the Great Spirit really had sent Tecumseh to them, and he had reached Detroit, just like he had said.¹⁴ Other Indian traditions, such as Chickasaw stories about the formation of Reelfoot Lake in northwest Tennessee, have credited the earthquakes to the Great Spirit who stomped his foot furiously because Chief Kalopin (meaning “reelfoot”) had disobeyed him.¹⁵ Natives regularly relied upon stories to explicate the natural world and its phenomena, and the effect of these tremendous quakes on the native population was no different. But no one has found an adequate answer to the question of Tecumseh’s prior knowledge of these earthquakes. He perhaps took the rhetoric about cosmic disturbances from a common stock of phrases parlayed by charismatic native leaders. Or, as typically suggested by Christian interpreters, his utterances were

¹³Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 4. This was an interesting play on words, since the name “Tecumseh” meant “Shooting Star.”

¹⁴See the version in Albert James Pickett, *History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi . . .*, 3rd ed. (Charleston: Walker and James, 1851), 2:240-254.

¹⁵“The Legend of Reelfoot Lake,” n.d., Reelfoot Lake: The Legend, <http://www.reelfootlake.com/legend.htm> (accessed 9 March 2006).

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

embellished post facto by the transmitters of oral tradition.¹⁶ To the contrary, Tecumseh seemed to know about the shocks well in advance and verbalized that understanding in various contexts.

Tecumseh grew up in a world already in conflict. Born in central Ohio in 1768 to a Creek mother and a Shawnee father, Tecumseh witnessed conflict along the border areas during the Revolutionary period.¹⁷ As a young leader, he and his brother Tenskwatawa resisted the rapid expansion of American civilization and opposed cession of Indian lands in Ohio to the United States in the Treaty of Greenville (1795).¹⁸ A decade later, after Tenskwatawa’s visions sparked renewal among the tribes of the Great Lakes region, Tecumseh with his great oratorical skill

¹⁶So Lewis S. Dean, “‘Tecumseh’s Prophecy’: The Great New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812 and 1843 in Alabama,” *Alabama Review* 47 (July 1994): 163-171.

¹⁷For the classic biography of Tecumseh, see Benjamin Drake, *Life of Tecumseh and of His Brother The Prophet . . .* (1841; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969). Best modern renditions include R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, The Library of American Biography, ed. Oscar Handlin (New York: Longman, 1984); and John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997). See too the concise bibliographical note and acknowledgments in Tucker, *Tecumseh: Vision of Glory*, 366-367, 382-384. Tucker remarks that “a properly equipped biographer of Tecumseh would have to be at once a detective, lawyer, anthropologist and psychoanalyst, as well as a historian.”

¹⁸For a summary of the progress of westernization in the Ohio Valley, see Beverly W. Bond, Jr., “American Civilization Comes to the Old Northwest,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (June 1932): 3-29.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

shifted the movement from cultural and religious revitalization toward intertribal confederacy.¹⁹

In reality, Tecumseh combined the savvy of heightened political rhetoric with his innate disdain for the white man. He saw clearly and poignantly the plight of the various tribes and their continual deterioration in face of white incursion, and he sought a remedy in federated revolt. Such a course of action called for invoking the celestial bodies that watched over the natural world and for using language of cosmic cataclysm or upheaval. Tecumseh, as leader of this federated revolt, viewed himself as the mouthpiece of the Great Spirit.²⁰

According to written traditions, Tecumseh had uttered these words while encamped among the Creeks at Tuckabatchee in October 1811:

In defiance of the white men of Ohio and Kentucky, I have traveled through their settlements—once our favorite hunting-grounds. No war-whoop was sounded, but there is blood upon our knives. The pale-faces felt the blow, but knew not from whence it came. Accursed be the race that has seized on our country, and made women of our warriors. Our fathers, from their tombs, reproach us as slaves and cowards. I hear them now in the wailing winds. The Muscogee were once a mighty people. The Georgians trembled at

¹⁹For a good assessment of the historical memory of what Tecumseh said and did versus what the Prophet said and did, consult Alfred A. Cave, “The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe: A Case Study of Historical Myth-Making,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 637-673; also, R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

²⁰See especially “When the white men first set foot on our grounds, they were hungry,” Tecumseh to the Osages in Missouri, Winter 1811-1812, in John D. Hunter, *Memoirs of a Captivity among the Indians of North America, from Childhood to the Age of Nineteen* (London, 1823), 45-48, cited by Bob Blaisdell, ed., *Great Speeches by Native Americans* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2000), 59-60; and, for Hunter’s remarks about the speech, William M. Clements, *Oratory in Native North America* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 139-142.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

our war-whoop; and the maidens of my tribe, in the distant lakes, sung the prowess of your warriors, and sighed for their embraces. Now, your very blood is white, your tomahawks have no edges, your bows and arrows were buried with your fathers. O Muscogeas, brethren of my mother! brush from your eyelids the sleep of slavery; once more strike for vengeance—once more strike for vengeance—once more for your country. The spirits of the mighty dead complain. The tears drop from the skies. Let the white race perish! They seize your land, they corrupt your women, they trample on your dead! Back! whence they came, upon a trail of blood, they must be driven! Back! back—ay, into the great water whose accursed waves brought them to our shores! Burn their dwellings! Destroy their stock! Slay their wives and children! The red man owns the country, and the pale-face must never enjoy it! War now! War forever! War upon the living! War upon the dead! Dig their very corpses from the graves! Our country must give no rest to a white man’s bones. All the tribes of the North are dancing the wardance. Two mighty warriors across the seas will send us arms.

Tecumseh will soon return to his country. My prophets shall tarry with you. They will stand between you and your enemies. When the white man approaches you the earth shall swallow him up. Soon shall you see my arm of fire stretched athwart the sky. I will stamp my foot at Tippecanoe, and the very earth shall shake.²¹

Various versions of this speech, from the memory of observers or through secondhand reports, have been passed along in the written sources. As Tecumseh traveled among the different tribes, he undoubtedly gave a number of speeches that had the same basic outline and used similar phrases and terminology. For sure, the connections in the lines of transmission of the tradition are unwieldy. George Washington Campbell, a U.S. Senator from East Tennessee, in a letter to Henry Sale Halbert, a leading expert on the Choctaw Indians, prefaced his version of Tecumseh’s speech with the following remarks:

The speech of Tecumseh as he spoke it to the Creeks or Muscogeas was very powerful, and the points were the very same to the Choctaws, Cherokees, Seminoles. It

²¹Quoted from Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: D. W. Jones and Son, 1868), 193-194, in Blaisdell, *Great Speeches by Native Americans*, 58.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

was told to me by Boles, the chief of a squad of Cherokees who split off from the Cherokees and finally settled in Eastern Texas, where Cherokee County is now. Stonahajo told of the speech to the Cherokees and the points were the same.²²

Even by mid-century, the redactions were many and complex. But the fact that no known transcriptions of this, or most of Tecumseh’s speeches, was made at the time it was spoken detracts in no way from the plausibility of its basic reliability. In fact, “the elemental similarity of the many accounts . . . lends considerable authenticity to what was uttered.”²³ The impact of Tecumseh’s words on the Creeks and other tribes, not their scientific accuracy or predictive quality by modern standards, remained paramount. As suggested by a prominent biographer of the Shawnee leader, “The significant fact is not whether Tecumseh did or did not predict the earthquakes, but that the Creeks believed that he had done so. That belief was crucial, for it established Tecumseh’s credibility.”²⁴

²²Allan W. Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 764, citing George Washington Campbell, letter to H. S. Halbert, n.d., *Tecumseh Papers*, Draper Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

²³Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Hearts*, 764. See also the comments by Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 148-150. For some of the challenges in analysis of native speeches, see David Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).

²⁴Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life*, 251. See too the fine discussion in Joel W. Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees’ Struggle for a New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 114-132.

On the effect of Tecumseh’s speech among the Creeks, McKenney’s observations seem somewhere between incredulity and patronization: “The reader will not be surprised to learn, that an earthquake had produced all this; but he will be, doubtless, that it should happen on the very day on which Tecumthe arrived at Detroit, and in exact fulfilment of his threat. It was the famous earthquake of New Madrid, on the Mississippi. We received the foregoing from the lips

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

Tecumseh, like other tribal leaders who gave speeches that were “very smooth flowing, full of logic, and quite persuasive,” tried to convince his listeners to bond together and resist the whites.²⁵ Tecumseh’s use of rhetoric in order to bring about confederacy represented “a point of contact between two cultures in conflict” that “both shaped and was shaped by that conflict.”²⁶ In this respect, his speech among the Creeks underscored “the complex connections among rhetoric, culture, and politics.”²⁷ But Tecumseh’s speech at Tuckabatchee went beyond the rhetoric of politics to invoke religious belief and its phenomenal claim to prognosticate future occurrences.

Very much a part of Shawnee culture and religion, the ability to foretell or predict future events set apart those who were believed to be endowed with the gift of prophecy. Other Algonquian tribes, notably the Delaware and Kickapoo, and the Iroquois peoples embraced and respected the genius of the prophet in tribal affairs. Strikingly, the century of extreme crisis for Indian identity, about 1750 to 1850, witnessed the rise of great prophets for most of these

of the Indians, when we were at Tuckhabatchee, in 1827, and near the residence of the Big Warrior. The anecdote may, therefore, be relied on. Tecumthe’s object, doubtless, was, on seeing that he had failed, by the usual appeal to the passions, and hopes, and war spirit of the Indians, to alarm their fears, little dreaming, himself, that on the day named, his threat would be executed with such punctuality and terrible fidelity.” McKinney and Hall, *Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes*, 48; compare Drake, *Life of Tecumseh*, 145.

²⁵W. C. Vanderwerth, *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 10.

²⁶Robert Yagelski, “A Rhetoric of Contact: Tecumseh and the Native American Confederacy,” *Rhetoric Review* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 65.

²⁷Ibid.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

peoples.²⁸ Given the circumstances at that time, the prophet’s calling was no idle wishfulness.

And the intricacies of prophetic insight among the Shawnee can be ascertained by a cursory examination of the tribe’s moral code and their prophet’s (i.e., Tenskwatawa) sacred slab.²⁹

Tecumseh, by referring to the earth shaking and fire crossing the sky, may have used “stock-in-trade” language. But as representative of the Great Spirit, he called upon both heaven and earth to act as witnesses for his movement against the white man’s atrocious trespasses on native ancestral lands. It therefore was not unusual or out of the ordinary for the great chief to be numbered among the prophets and make use of his gift of prediction when confronting a crisis situation.³⁰

All of this no doubt concurred with Shawnee cosmology that was based on a belief in many deities. Like most tribes, the Shawnee followed a hierarchy of spiritual forces that for them was mothered by Kokomthena (“Our Grandmother”) and fathered by their Supreme Being or Great Spirit who was called Muyetelemilakwau (“the Finisher”).³¹ Everything hinged around belief in these ancestral spirits, and nothing happened without their benevolent blessing or

²⁸See James H. Howard, *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native Indian Tribe and Its Cultural Background* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 196.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 201-202, 204-207.

³⁰See the list of native prophets in Ernest Thompson Seton and Julia M. Seton, *The Gospel of the Redman: A Way of Life* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Seton Village, 1966), 88-94.

³¹Howard, *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native Indian Tribe*, 162ff.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

malevolent curse. In this respect, it would have been unnatural for Tecumseh to utter words of federation in response to white usurpation of land or talk of war against the whites, as he did at Tuckabatchee, without reference to these spiritual forces. These chief deities also spoke through the prophets—their special representatives to people on earth. As the deities controlled the natural forces on the land, they chose to impart knowledge of these events through the prophets.

And Shawnee cosmology, like conservative Indian beliefs generally, prescribed imminent catastrophe when the laws of the higher deities were neglected or broken.³² In his efforts among the natives, Tecumseh tried to uphold the sanctity of the ancestral lands and ways and thereby avert the anger of the Great Spirit and inevitable disaster. His warnings were anything but trickery or political maneuvering. In the context of Indian cosmology and beliefs about prophecy, his predictions of the comet and the earthquakes make perfectly good sense. Had not Tecumseh voiced disapproval of those who resisted confederation against the white man and done so from the highest authority (i.e., the Great Spirit) with the direst consequences (i.e., the shaking of the earth), he would have failed to live up to his calling as a prophet in the fullest tradition of the Shawnee people.

³²Ibid., 168.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, “Tecumseh’s Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes,” in “Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest” (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55
All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bergeron, Paul H., Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith. *Tennesseans and Their History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.
- Blaisdell, Bob, ed. *Great Speeches by Native Americans*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2000.
- Bond, Beverly W., Jr. “American Civilization Comes to the Old Northwest.” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (June 1932): 3-29.
- Cave, Alfred A. “The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe: A Case Study of Historical Myth-Making.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 637-673.
- Clements, William M. *Oratory in Native North America*. Tuscon, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2002.
- Dean, Lewis S. “‘Tecumseh’s Prophecy’: The Great New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812 and 1843 in Alabama.” *Alabama Review* 47 (July 1994): 163-171.
- de Boer, Jelle Zeilinga, and Donald Theodore Sanders. *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Drake, Benjamin. *Life of Tecumseh and of His Brother The Prophet . . .* 1841. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- Eckert, Allan W. *The Frontiersman: A Narrative*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967.
- _____. *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh*. New York: Bantam Books, 1992.
- Edmunds, R. David. *The Shawnee Prophet*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- _____. *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*. The Library of American Biography. Edited by Oscar Handlin. New York: Longman, 1984.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, "Tecumseh's Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes," in "Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest" (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

Guice, John D. W. "1811-Year of Wonders in the Mississippi Territory." *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 167-170.

Hall, Raven. *The Cherokee Sacred Calendar: A Handbook of the Ancient Native American Tradition*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2000.

Howard James H. *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native Indian Tribe and Its Cultural Background*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981.

Irwin, Lee. "Freedom, Law and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance." *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 35-55.

Kidwell, Clara Sue, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker. *A Native American Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001.

Latrobe, Charles Joseph. *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833*. Vol. 1. London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835.

"The Legend of Reelfoot Lake." n.d. Reelfoot Lake: The Legend. <http://www.reelfootlake.com/legend.htm> (accessed 9 March 2006).

Martin, Joel W. *The Land Looks After Us: A History of Native American Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

_____. *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees' Struggle for a New World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

McKenney, Thomas L., and James Hall. *Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of Ninety-Five of 120 Principal Chiefs from the Indian Tribes of North America*. Philadelphia: Frederick W. Greenough, 1838.

McLoughlin, William G. "Ghost Dance Movements: Some Thoughts on Definition Based on Cherokee History." *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 25-44.

_____. "New Angles of Vision on the Cherokee Ghost Dance Movement of 1811-1812." *American Indian Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1979): 317-345.

Mitchell, Robert D., and Paul A. Grove, eds. *The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*. Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.

David W Fletcher, Chapter 2, "Tecumseh's Prediction of the New Madrid Earthquakes," in "Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest" (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007), 42-55

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

Murray, David. *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Penick, James Lal, Jr. *The New Madrid Earthquakes*, rev. ed. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1981.

Pesantubbee, Michelene E. "When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811-12." *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 301-317.

Pickett, Albert James. *History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi . . .*, 3rd ed. 2 Vols. Charleston: Walker and James, 1851.

Pierce, William Leigh. Letter to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post*. 25 December 1811. *An Account of the Great Earthquakes, in the Western States, particularly on the Mississippi River; December 16-23, 1811*. Newburyport, Massachusetts: Thomas & Whipple, 1812.

Remini, Robert V. *Andrew Jackson & His Indian Wars*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Seton, Ernest Thompson, and Julia M. Seton. *The Gospel of the Redman: A Way of Life*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Seton Village, 1966.

Sugden, John. "Early Pan-Indianism: Tecumseh's Tour of the Indian Country, 1811-1812." *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 273-304.

_____. *Tecumseh: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Thornton, Russell. "Boundary Dissolution and Revitalization Movements: The Case of the Nineteenth Century Cherokees." *Ethnohistory* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 359-383.

Tucker, Glenn. *Tecumseh: Vision of Glory*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1956.

Vanderwerth, W. C. *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.

Yagelski, Robert. "A Rhetoric of Contact: Tecumseh and the Native American Confederacy." *Rhetoric Review* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 64-77.