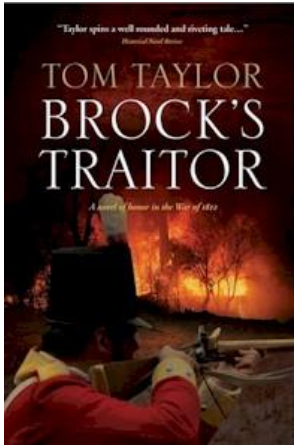


# The Red Pencil: Tom Taylor's Brock's Traitor

by Cindy Vallar



Brock's Traitor by Tom Taylor

**Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Tom Taylor's *Brock's Traitor*.**

Characters. They are essential to any story. They are equally important in propelling the story from the beginning through the middle to its conclusion. But any character – whether they play a major or minor role – must be believable and must draw us into the story, involve us to such a degree that we care about them. “[Readers] want your characters to seem like real people. Whole and alive, believable and worth caring about. Readers want to get to know your characters as well as they know their own friends, their own family.”<sup>1</sup>

How does an author create such a character? She examines what motivates the character, where he comes from, what his reputation is, and what he looks like. She also takes into account his relationships with other characters, his habits and patterns, his talents and abilities, and his tastes and preferences. Of all these elements, the three we care about the most are: What does the character do in the story? What are his motives? What incidents from his past influence his actions in the present?

When we open the third book in Tom Taylor's series about Jonathan Westlake during the War of 1812, we might expect that Jonathan will be there to greet us. Instead, a new character, Willie Robertson, draws us into *Brock's Traitor*. Even though he's a minor character, we still expect him to hold our attention and play an important role in moving the story forward.

Draft:

*September 12, 1812 Upper Canada*

*The Americans were coming.*

*A volunteer in the Leeds County Militia, Willie Robertson stood in line at attention while peering down a bend in the road. He forced himself to take a deep breath of cool morning air but found it impossible to relax his shoulders. Known only to himself as an artist of immense talent, he wondered why he was about to kill his former countrymen.*

These opening paragraphs of an early draft introduce us to Willie. The first, which is called the hook, is okay, but the purpose of the hook is to grab our attention and keep it riveted to the story. We know Willie's name, where he is, what he sees himself as, and that at one time he lived in the United States. What we don't know is how he feels. Nor are we standing beside Willie in that line of soldiers, living the scene through his eyes. As Tom works on revisions, he keeps in mind the writer's adage of *Want . . . Because . . . But*. "In every scene someone has to **Want** something **Because** [the stakes] **But** they can't get it [the conflict]. This draws the reader in so that they are cheering for one side or the other."<sup>2</sup> The published version of the opening begins to reflect this.

Final:

*Upper Canada, September 1812*

*The Americans were coming to kill him.*

*Young Willie Robertson stood to attention at the end of a long line of Leeds County Militia, his Brown Bess musket clasped tight at his side. He forced himself to take a deep breath of morning air but found it impossible to relax his shoulders. An artist of immense talent, something known only to himself, he wondered what he was doing here about to fight his former countrymen. In fact, he doubted if he even could.*

Since Willie is the principal character in this scene, we need to see events unfold from his perspective. Early drafts don't usually accomplish this in sufficient detail for that to occur.

Draft:

*To the back of the ranks, loomed the storehouse and home of Mister Joel Stone. Willie figured that the approaching riflemen would ransack the buildings, giving him time to run. If he could get past the house, he'd be safe as gofer in its hole.*

This paragraph fails to make us see what Willie sees, and it doesn't maintain the level of tension necessary to hold our interest. "I needed to **show** Willie being scared so it is natural to fumble his musket." Tom also omits any reference to Joel Stone by name because "even though he was an actual historical figure, I think it is important to keep the number of characters to the minimum. It is easy in historical fiction to go the other way and have too many."

Final:

*Willie fumbled his Brown Bess before ramming the ball down the barrel and sliding the ramrod back in place. The two ranks blocked the road. Directly behind them stood the colonel's storehouse rich in supplies, and farther back rose his beautiful residence. It was the kind that Willie liked to draw, with a big white*

*veranda encircling half the house. Willie figured that the approaching riflemen would pause to ransack the storehouse, thereby giving him time to run. If he could just get himself over to that residence, he'd be safe as a groundhog in its hole.*

This rewrite ramps up the tension and reveals more of Willie's character, from his perspective as an artist. That makes it easy for us to see what Willie sees, while we nod our heads at how his rationale makes sense.

In battle the greatest personal stake is survival, and this is a key element in the scene. Essentially, it's kill or be killed, and how a character reacts exposes how he feels about honor. That's the primary theme of *Brock's Traitor*, but as Jonathan Westlake discovers, Willie's purpose as a character is to "show Westlake one type of honour, just as other characters are there to perhaps surprise him with their own version of the term."

Draft:

*Willie squeezed the trigger and the musket rammed into his shoulder. Sixty muskets crash out spitting flame and balls but Willie saw only two riflemen fall to the ground before the smoke obscured his view.*

*"Make ready."*

*The sergeant was shouting again only this time through Willie's ringing ears. Thirty seconds to fire again. He raised his musket to begin the prime and load drill and heard that officer with the white plumes yell.*

*"Charge!"*

*Running forty yards in less than thirty seconds was easy. Willie was about to be stabbed. The smoke lifted slightly and he caught a glance of that smiling officer's face. The militiaman beside him bumped his arm and Willie glanced down the line. He was the only one still standing. He dropped his musket and ran for the house.*

Aside from the physical conflict (the battle), this early version demonstrates a bit of Willie's inner conflict (fear vs. duty). This portrayal, though, casts shadows on Willie's honor. Those shadows disappear in the published version because Tom's revisions place us beside Willie and truly **show** us why he runs.

Final:

*In the early morning light, in the quiet stillness, Willie pressed the trigger and the Brown Bess recoiled hard into his shoulder. Sixty muskets crashed out, spitting flame and balls, but Willie saw only two of the riflemen fall to the ground before the smoke obscured his view.*

*“Prime and load!” His ears ringing, Willie heard someone hollering, but it sounded far off, the voice unsteady. Through the drifting smoke, he saw the sergeant’s lips move.*

*“Prime and load, I say,” the old sergeant repeated.*

*Willie raised his musket to begin the prime-and-load drill. When he was calm, it took him thirty seconds to load and fire again.*

*He heard that officer with the white plumes yelling, “Charge!”*

*The enemy riflemen could easily cover forty yards in less than thirty seconds.*

*No time to reload. Willie was about to be stabbed, run through with an officer’s sabre as easy as poking a pincushion. The musket smoke from the volley lifted, and he caught a glance of that officer’s grinning face. Willie felt a bump to his arm as the militiaman next to him turned and bolted. He glanced to his right. No one. He was the only man still standing in line.*

*Willie threw down his Brown Bess and ran to save his life.*

This scene casts Willie’s fear in an honorable light, while keeping to the writing adage of *Want . . . Because . . . But*. “Willie doesn’t want his fellow militiamen to think he’s a coward even though he’s scared to death. He stands there willing to die rather than be dishonorable. Finally he wants to save his own life just like they do.”

In creating characters, writers “use the senses to talk about” them. But these aren’t the only devices Tom uses to help us visualize Willie, Westlake, and the other characters that populate the story. “[O]ne has to always keep in mind what the character wants and what is driving him forward, especially the protagonist – in the case of *Brock’s Traitor*, Lt. Jonathan Westlake.” Tom succeeds in this, which makes his novels involve far more than just the history of the war. This may, in part, be because he begins each story “with an idea: Redemption [*Brock’s Agent*], freedom [*Brock’s Railroad*], and honour [*Brock’s Traitor*].” Once he has the theme, he writes the ending of the novel before starting the beginning. “Now I know where I am going. I stake out the historical pillars I need to support the grand fiction story on top. Finally, I fill in the characters as I need them to propel the story in the direction I need it to go.” This explains why Willie is an artist. “I wanted the opening scene to be extraordinarily visual to draw the reader in immediately. I thought an artist might see it a little clearer than the rest of us. Also, . . . Willie tries to see the truth in whatever he sketches.”

So who is Willie? “[A] young inexperienced male, age 14, wears glasses, has a limp, and a burning passion to be a famous artist. Another key point to keep in mind is that he is an American. Upper Canada at the time of the war was over 60 percent American. In many ways, this conflict was a civil war fought between Americans. Remember that

New England threatened [to] secede if they were not allowed to continue trading with Britain.”

Why does Willie open the story, rather than the series’ protagonist? “I wanted to try something different and see if it would work. *Brock’s Agent* opens with Westlake but *Brock’s Railroad* opens at 10 Downing Street with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of War.” The next book, however, “opens with Westlake in a battle scene!”

In the Author’s Note to *Irish Love*, Father Andrew Greeley writes, “The purpose of historical fiction is to enable a reader through the perspective of the characters in the story to feel that she or he is present at the events.”<sup>3</sup> This is one goal to which all historical novelists aspire – one which Tom succeeds in mastering – but they often discover that writing historical fiction challenges them because the history may interfere with the story. For those readers who seek to become writers of historical fiction, Tom offers this sage advice:

Historical fiction is a lie that tells a truth. As fictional writers, we can capture the spirit of the times and their characters perhaps better than the historian. [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel said history is the story of freedom. That’s also true of the best historical fiction. And we can write it by telling a great story. I always keep in mind Bernard Cornwell’s wonderful advice: If readers wanted a history book, they’d go buy one. The story, the story, the story. That’s our job. Yes, this is hard to do, but if you are not going for a miracle, what’s the point?

Like Willie, Tom once served in the militia, and his time with the Toronto 7<sup>th</sup> Artillery provides him with experience that helps him to craft believable characters. He also achieves his goal of maintaining “a balanced perspective of the war” since each book unfolds from the perspectives of characters who are Canadian, American, British, French, or Native American. Those characters are “as complex as real people,” even minor ones such as Willie Robertson, and “[t]he intensity of *Brock’s Traitor* captures [us] from the start and never lets go until the last page is turned. Even then, the characters and story continue to haunt long after [we finish] the book.”<sup>4</sup> Tom invites readers to visit his website, [www.tomtaylor.ca](http://www.tomtaylor.ca), to learn more about him and the books in this series.

Notes:

1. Orson Scott Card. *Characters and Viewpoint*. Writer’s Digest Books, 1988, 5.
2. E-mail correspondence with the author while discussing his series for my article “The Obscure War: HF and the War of 1812.” (*Historical Novels Review*, August 2013, 8-9).
3. Andrew M. Greeley. *Irish Love*. Tor, 2001.
4. From my review of *Brock’s Traitor*, which appeared in the August 2013 issue of *Historical Novels Review*.

**About the contributor:** CINDY VALLAR is a columnist, editor, historical novelist, and workshop presenter. Aside from contributions to *HNR*, her work includes *The Scottish Thistle*, the soon-to-released short story “Rumble the Dragon,” and various articles on the history of maritime piracy. You can visit her at [www.cindyvallar.com](http://www.cindyvallar.com).

---

Published in *Historical Novels Review* | **Issue 66, November 2013**