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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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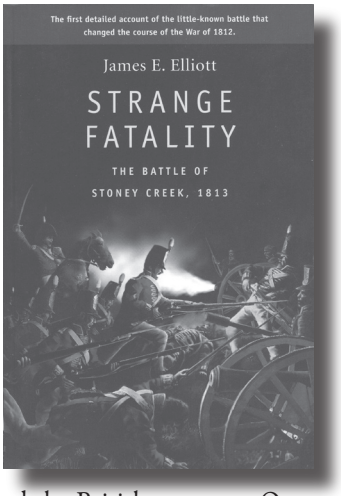
## *Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813*

By James E. Elliott

Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2009. viii + 311 pages. $24.95 softcover. ISBN 978-1-896941-58-5 (www.rbstudiobooks.com)




In the early hours of Sunday, 6 June 1813, the British army in the Niagara Peninsula launched a desperate night attack on a much larger American force at Stoney Creek (near Hamilton, Ontario). Despite near disaster at the outset, a small group of British regulars managed to capture the American artillery and, in the process, capture the two American commanders, Brigadier Generals Chandler and Winder. Beginning with this desperate gamble—a night attack by some eight hundred British troops upon a force of more than three thousand Americans—the American campaign to capture the Niagara peninsula unravelled. The Americans retreated to Fort George and by December 1813 had abandoned Canadian territory for the safety of New York state. The battle of Stoney Creek has thus entered the list of decisive struggles, from Queenston Heights in 1812 to Lundy's Lane in 1814, in the successful defense of Upper Canada in the War of 1812 on the Niagara frontier.

James Elliott, a journalist with the Hamilton *Spectator* and a consultant for *Canada: A People's History*, has written an account of this defensive victory that is intensely detailed, carefully documented, well illustrated, and relatively well organized. He breaks up those decisive days of the American invasion (27 May-9 June 1813) into some forty units of narrative description in which both American and British actions are told and examined. Eight appendices focus on the order of battle, weapons and casualties.

Elliott begins his narrative with the American taking of Fort George by amphibious invasion and the British retreat to Queenston. Brigadier General Vincent decided to withdraw to Burlington Heights (Hamilton) where some 1,800 troops were poised. Two American brigades pursued, reaching Gage farm, camping just west of the hamlet of Stoney Creek. Reconnaissance revealed how vulnerable the British would be in an open, daylight contest, and therefore they gambled on the surprise night attack. The American army was known to be poorly led by politically appointed generals and had few, experienced regular soldiers. The Gage farm camp was no exception. It had few pickets and the artillery had no infantry support.

The action began at 2:20 a.m. on 6 June and lasted about one hour. Some 800 British regulars easily overcame the pickets (most of whom were sleeping) and charged the Americans camped out on the meadow below the farm. However, inappropriate cheering by the British lost the element of surprise, and their command and control of the troops broke down. The majority of the American infantry rallied at the brow of the meadow and poured a withering fire down upon the British. The British scattered to the woods, but one small group captured the American artil-

lery, plus the two American commanders, and the American defense fragmented. From initial surprise, to incipient disaster, to sudden victory, the British organized a rapid retreat before dawn could reveal how low their strength really was. The Americans withdrew to Fort George amid fear of a counter-offensive by the Royal Navy, and were on the defensive for the rest of 1813. Elliott estimates that over 200 British troops were imprisoned, wounded or killed, a casualty rate of 25 per cent versus the American rate of about 10 per cent.

Elliott gives a stirring account of these events but some contextual comments are in order. Despite the strong production—organization, maps, and historic images—and his care in documenting both sides of the story in greater detail than ever before, some reorganization would help the narrative. Readers need a timeline. Failure to conclude the narrative with the American evacuation in 1813 is odd. The appendices could also be reordered, placing the relevant War of 1812 material first.

Three of the appendices conceal what I would regard as the most significant aspect of the book: challenging assumed truths. First, Elliott debunks the claimed role of Canadian scouts like Billy Green, for which there appears to be no documentation. Next, he shows how modern forensic methods have been able to demonstrate the brutal character of the battle, possibly including battlefield executions. And thirdly, Elliott challenges the rather perverse reinterpretation, by Victorian-era citizens, of the meaning of the Stoney Creek Battlefield Park for (apparently) their own purposes. He claims that the park displays (including a monument built to rival Brock's at Queenston Heights) do not properly reflect the military and political circumstances: a representative example of the great power of military competition that characterized eastern North America until the War of 1812. Elliott finds the park to have been, instead, an expression of late nineteenth century imperialism, focused on Canadian settlers who were bystanders in the clash, and celebrating peace with the United States. This is all provocative thinking, and it is a mystery why Elliott has relegated the role of critical versus social memory to a remote part of such an engaging manuscript.

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## *"Union is Strength":*
### *W. L. Mackenzie, the Children of Peace, and the Emergence of Joint Stock Democracy in Upper Canada*

By Albert Schrauwers

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. 320 pages. $70.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-8020-9927-3 (www.utppublishing.com)

In this tightly-packed, ambitious volume, Albert Schrauwers depicts a fresh version of the history of Upper Canada of the 1820s and 1830s. It is a tale of corporate, charitable, commercial, and political development. If it has a hero, it is not William Lyon Mackenzie (despite the book's title), but David Will-