

Ridgeway: the American Fenian Invasion and the 1866 Battle That Made Canada by Peter Vronsky

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*Ridgeway: the American Fenian Invasion and
the 1866 Battle That Made Canada*

By Peter Vronsky

Toronto: Allen Lane, 2011. 432 pages. \$34.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-670-06803-6 (www.allenlane.ca);

Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2012. \$20.00 paperback. ISBN 978-0-143-16841-6 (www.penguin.ca)

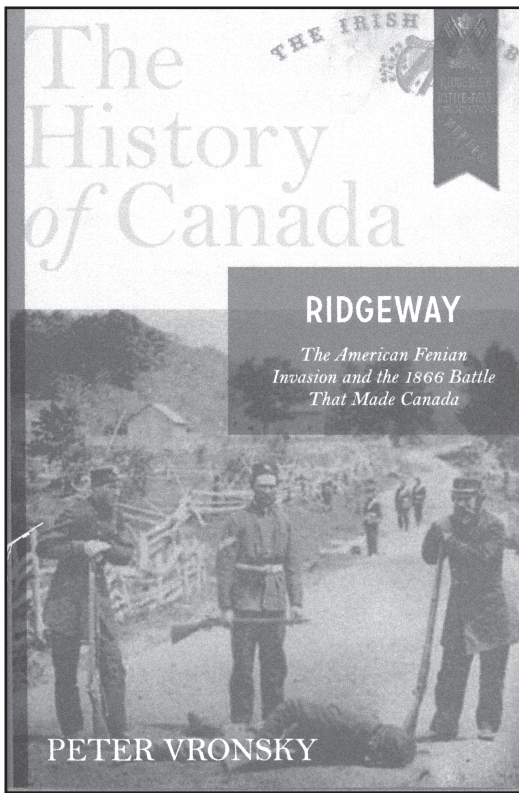
In June 1866, close to 1,500 members of the Fenian Brotherhood crossed the Niagara River from Buffalo, New York, into Fort Erie, Canada West. Most were hardened Civil War veterans, both Catholic and Protestant, who were members of an organization intent on capturing British North America as a step towards Irish independence. Standing against them near the villages of Ridgeway and Fort Erie was a collection of mostly young, inexperienced Canadian and British soldiers. They were badly led, poorly armed and had so few provisions that the survivors long remembered how thirsty and hungry they were. In both encounters, the Fenians triumphed. Indeed, at Ridgeway, the Canadian troops broke and ran. But the Fenian victory was short-lived, for without reinforcements, they had little choice but to return to New York where they were quickly arrested by American authorities, then released. The battles were costly: 13 Canadians were killed or died of wounds or disease, and another 72 were wounded. (260) Author Peter Vronsky argues that these battles are lost to Canadian history like an “acoustical shadow.”

Vronsky presents us a very well researched, tightly written account that strikes a nice balance between academic and popular history. The Fenian plan for coordinated attacks from Vermont, New York, Michigan and further west fizzled out, but the first four chapters describe a threat of invasion so real that both sides deployed spies to good effect. While the Canadi-

ans infiltrated Fenian ‘circles’ in New York state, Fenian sympathizers quietly scouted routes of advance in the Niagara peninsula. The actual battles over three days in June take up five of the book’s twelve chapters. They are too detailed in spots, but the author’s work explaining the weaponry of the time offers a sober reminder of just how damaging these ‘pre-industrial’ skirmishes could be. The many soldiers’ accounts are fascinating reading. Imagine university professors today exhorting their students to arms, as Henry Croft did in Toronto. Croft stayed behind, but promising students like John Mewburn and William Tempest listened to Croft’s pleas and were on the firing line just days later. These young men were among the seven who died in action.

Just what meaning we may give to this battle is more difficult to figure. Some may look here for the origins of the Canadian army. If so, its early leadership was horrendous. Officers like Lieutenant-Colonel George Peacocke went into battle without accurate maps. Others, like Albert Booker Jr. of Hamilton’s 13th Battalion had little tactical training, and even less sense. Accusations of cowardice and incompetence prompted several courts of inquiry that destroyed Booker’s reputation, drove him from his native Hamilton, and may have shortened his life. Others accused Lieutenant-Colonel John Dennis of running from the skirmishes of Fort Erie, but he somehow survived the battle of reputations that followed.

Such reversals and controversies only



placed the memory of the Fenian invasion in dispute. The people of Toronto dedicated a suitably ornate Volunteers Memorial at Queen's Park in July 1870. But Vronsky argues that the fragile state of Confederation through the next twenty-five years made it difficult to understand what exactly the 'Veterans of '66' volunteered for. Not until the 1890s did Torontonians gather again at the Memorial to claim, "The bloodshed at Ridgeway was the martyr-seed of a nation." (283) In other words, the memory of Ridgeway was refashioned to serve a national purpose. Decoration Day continued to be held close to the anniversary of the Fenian invasion until 1931, when the memory of the First World War pushed the events of 1866 back into the shadows.

I know that one should never judge a

book by its cover, but two things there give me pause. The first is the notion that this skirmish "Made Canada." Such claims tend to sell books (and governments) these days, and the author argues that the invasion "tested Canadian commitment to fundamental principles of liberty and justice...." (264) If so, we failed the test. Rights of Habeas Corpus were suspended for a year after the invasion. Canadian Catholics and Protestants continued to hate each other well into the twentieth century. Quite rightly, the author acknowledges a more humbling point that the Fenian invasion demonstrated how Canada's security (and sovereignty) rested on the quiet diplomacy of the British and the Americans.

What is missing here is equally curious, for I had always understood that the Fenian raids came at a particularly opportune time for those forces working towards Confederation. The momentum towards a greater British North American union had slowed in 1866, but the Fenian raids helped those who favoured Confederation argue that a wider union could help defend against the United States. If ever there was a case that the Fenian raids "Made Canada," surely this was it. Yet, this argument seems lost in an otherwise finely told story.

Less understandable is the publisher's choice of cover photograph that depicts the grisly aftermath of another Fenian raid that took place four years later, in Quebec. Bloodshed might sell books. But this book, and the series in which it is a part, is strong enough to stand on a foundation of good research and storytelling that all Canadians should welcome.

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