



Page Turners

THREE NEW BOOKS FROM LOCAL AUTHORS WHO LOVE A GOOD YARN

Hamilton journalist and author James E. Elliott has won a deserved reputation as an immersive storyteller and an engaging historical buff. Both qualities are stongly in play in *Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813* (Robin Brass Studio). In it, Elliott has compellingly reconstructed one of the least understood actions of the War of 1812, a battle which locals will recognize from barely recollected history lessons and a colourful re-enactment staged annually by re-creationists in Stoney Creek. Elliott's rigorous and fastidiously detailed look at this battle and the events surrounding it leads to an interesting realization. Namely, that the history of this particular conflict has been always murky – from the slapdash melee that gave birth to an improbable victory to the first battlefield reports, which exercised an optimistic sort of spin control.

The significance of the battle itself can scarcely be overstated. The largest amphibious force in American history to that point (6,000 troops manning some 140 vessels) stormed

ashore near the mouth of the Niagara River, captured Fort George and shortly drove to the northwest, pursuing a rattled and ravaged contingent of the British army. What seemed like decisive and undeniable momentum was halted and reversed ten days later in a Stoney Creek field, where a single bayonet

charge smashed the American artillery line and captured two generals (and momentarily lost a British brigadier, wandering dazed and hatless in the woods as if in a Blake Edwards movie), forcing the Americans into an undignified retreat.

That thumbnail sketch can hardly do

justice to the author's faithfully rendered portrait of the military and political life of the day. (It's a picture that is just as comic as the bumbling of today's political jackanapes.) Elliott's past work as a history buff is just part of the reason for his evocative treatment. He is able to get inside the conflict exceptionally well because he has taken part in countless re-enactments of the clash, granting him the sort of insight that has, in the past, led him to be called on for several episodes of the CBC's Gemini-winning *Canada: A People's History*, both as a consultant and a special-skills extra. That experience lends heightened reality to period warfare. For anyone whose eyes glazed upon hearing the battle recounted in public school, the dramatic tapestry of the chaotic, almost suicidal night attack will seem like an electric shock.

And although the night battle is fascinating, it is but part of an exquisitely detailed and thoroughly researched yarn that never drags or – despite copious maps, illustrations and richly annotated appendices and endnotes – descends into academic torpor. While some patches of the history remain inscrutable, Elliott is careful to let what facts there are speak for themselves. In doing so, he has crafted an even-handed and compelling story of a moment in our shared history, one that might easily have gone very, very differently. Highly recommended.