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Stoney Creek
Community

What happened in Stoney Creek formed our country, says author

BY PAUL HUTCHINGS
NEWS STAFF

When James Elliott left the *Hamilton Spectator* on a leave of absence to write his new book he figured he would be back in a year. After all, he thought, a year should be long enough to write a book, right?

But soon that year turned into two, then three.

Eventually he had to quit because he knew he just had to finish. Finally, five years after that leave of absence, *Strange Fatality* hit the shelves.

Strange Fatality chronicles what Mr. Elliott calls one of the most pivotal battles during the War of 1812 that pitted the American forces against an outnumbered British army. Against the odds, the British defeated the Americans and drove them back across the border, and in a very real sense, Canada was born.

As a reporter he came to Hamilton in the late 1980 and became interested in the War of 1812 after writing a story about it for the *Spectator*.

After the piece was printed he was struck by that piece of history that was both phenomenal but confusing, with very little historical documents that showed what really happened at what is now Battlefield Park.

He called the eventual project a labour of love.

"When it's a history book it has to be a labour of love," he sighed while sitting on the front porch of the Battlefield house, a rather fitting setting for a man so interested in what happened there. "I think in some ways you reach a point in your life where you want to know how we got to where we are. I look back at this period of time, even though Canada

wasn't a country then, just a collection of colonies, as being pivotal in the history of the country. At that time southern Ontario came to within a whisper of being a state of the union and I think people should appreciate that."

He hopes the book will go towards dispelling the myth that nothing ever happened here.

"I can tell you that something very profound happened right here," he said, then quipped, "If it had gone the other way we wouldn't have to worry about showing our passports while crossing the border."

The book is a must-read for anyone interested in history. The battle is reconstructed within the pages in a very reader-friendly prose. Anyone can enjoy the engaging tale.

Tracking down the information he needed was the biggest challenge Mr. Elliott faced. He said like most journalists he was always searching for the narrative, the word of those who had been there. Unfortunately the most that was available were from officers, whereas he wanted to hear from what he called the rank and file, or the regular fighting soldiers. Because the level of literacy was low among them 200 years ago, finding letters written from them was exceedingly difficult.

"I struggled to find the stories from the real people. These forms of communications are hard to track down, and you find them in the strangest places," he recalled. "I found someone had posted (a letter) on a genealogy site in the United States, it mentioned the 22nd US Regiment and I thought, this guy had to have been at Stoney Creek. I checked the casualty records and this guy was killed here. So the information came from all over the place."

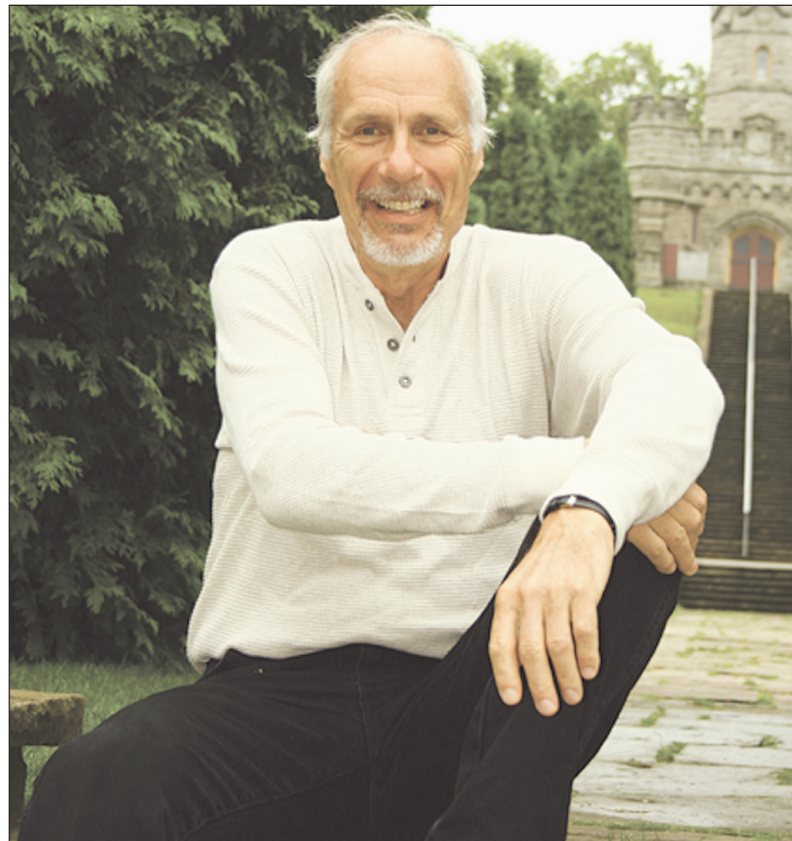


PHOTO BY PAUL HUTCHINGS

James Elliott's new book, *Strange Fatality*, tells the story of the Battle of Stoney Creek almost 200 years ago. Mr. Elliott spent five years working on the project and called it a "Labour of love."

Mr. Elliott hopes the book helps get Canadians interested in their history, a subject that too many of us either don't know about or take for granted. One of his goals was to get Canadians to take pride in their past, because, he said, we're guilty of not knowing our history.

"This is something that bothers me, we try to sell this country as a blank slate," he said. "We didn't get to be the country that so many peo-

ple want to come to without having institutions and laws and a culture that fosters democracy. It didn't just happen by accident but in some cases an attitude prevails that...we don't want to know about this stuff. But it's how we ended up here today."

The book, *Strange Fatality*, is available at Chapters-Indigo and Amazon, as well as other book-sellers.