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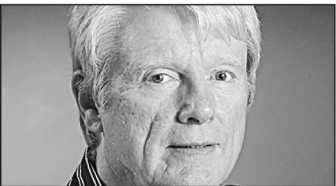
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The Fraser boys and a nation-building battle



GORD HENDERSON

Opinion

You and I are Canadians because a 23-year-old Highland soldier, wielding 17 inches of cold steel backed by a warrior's iron will, gambled that he could sprint like mad down a dirt road in the dark and impale the crews of two American artillery pieces before the guns could be reloaded and blow him and his mates to bits. If tall, imposing Sgt. Alexander Fraser and his men had failed in that desperate fixed bayonets charge at the Battle of Stoney Creek on the night of June 6, 1813, it's likely all of what is now southern Ontario would have fallen to the

supremely confident American invaders and the nation we call Canada would have been stillborn.

Why should we care? Why, demanded an old friend, should anyone in modern day Windsor, with all its contemporary woes, have the slightest interest in the story of a battle that took place almost two centuries ago in the shadow of the Niagara Escarpment, near what is now the city of Hamilton? The plain and simple answer, I told him, is that we would have been celebrating the Fourth of July here last weekend if the Fraser boys and their comrades-in-arms hadn't turned the tables in a winner-take-all battle that our side was losing.

If there was an Ontario, it would be a state of the union. If there was a Windsor, sporting a far less British name, it would be just another suburb of Detroit on a sleepy river crossing with no particular relevance.

The other answer is that it's one hell of a gripping story as told by author James E. Elliott in *Strange Fatality*, the first detailed account of the battle that altered the course of the War of 1812 and made it possible for Canada to emerge as a nation half a century later.

Here's the disclaimer: Elliott, a former Windsor Star editorial writer, born and raised in Essex County, is an old friend who moved on to the Hamilton Spectator before immersing himself full time in research focused on the small but critical war that laid the foundations of this wonderful country so many of us take for granted.

You know my bias. But I'm in awe of Elliott's triumph, built on five exhausting and frustrating years of rooting through archives, files, diaries and letters, in turning a 196-year-old battle, long relegated to musty old textbooks, into a nail-biting, flesh-and-blood showdown that feels like it

took place last week.

It's a David and Goliath story if ever there was one, with as many as 6,000 American invaders pursuing a far smaller British force, backed by Canadian militia and a handful of native warriors, that was contemplating retreating all the way to Kingston, leaving southern Ontario in U.S. hands, probably for all time.

But instead of cutting and running, or facing the Americans in a daylight battle they were certain to lose, the British chose to roll the dice, gambling that a force of less than 800 could rush the poorly guarded U.S. encampment under the cover of darkness, creating havoc and triggering a rout.

It nearly worked. If a few British soldiers hadn't shattered the silence with excited war cries as they neared the enemy, the victory could have been overwhelming. Instead it teetered on the brink of disaster, with American musket

balls and cannon fire ripping through Redcoats who were illuminated by abandoned American campfires.

That's when Alexander Fraser, his younger brother Peter and up to 30 other volunteers from the mostly Irish 49th Regiment made their run for the guns that turned the tide.

As Elliott described it: "With bayonets charged, the little party set off down the road at a run reverting to the most basic form of warfare where man-to-man combat with edged weapons was the standard and impromptu charges the norm."

The gamble worked. They hit the American battery just as the guns were about to be discharged, "stabbing every horse and man they met." The Fraser brothers, described as "a two-man wrecking crew," killed or wounded 11 American soldiers that night. Alexander Fraser, in the ultimate humiliation, singlehandedly captured the two American generals in

charge of the invasion force.

Remarkably, as they skedaddled back to what is now Niagara-on-the-Lake, with their invasion hopes dashed, the Americans managed to portray Stoney Creek as an overwhelming U.S. victory.

Alexander Fraser eventually retired to Perth, Ont. where he fathered 13 children, became a militia colonel and a colourful justice of the peace and was eulogized when he died in 1872 as the "beau ideal of a Highland gentleman" and "a soldier every inch."

In almost any other country, this would be a movie and a prominent piece of the national mythology.

But here where history is dismissed as stodgy and irrelevant, we wouldn't have a clue about one of Canada's pivotal nation-building events if it weren't for the herculean efforts of James Elliott to give us *Strange Fatality*.

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