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BOOKS

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The 'other side' of the War of 1812

By **DAN MOREY**
Contributing writer

The War of 1812 doesn't get a lot of attention. Far more important battles were being waged in the world at the time. Napoleon began his invasion of Russia in June, a disastrous move that is commemorated in Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture.

Our War of 1812, fought against the United Kingdom, also produced a famous piece of music — the "Star Spangled Banner," written by Francis Scott Key during the 1814 defense of Fort McHenry at the Battle of Baltimore.

In school, we learned about the American victory at Baltimore, and also our big naval win in the Battle of Lake Erie. Our numerous defeats, however, were seldom mentioned, and the spin seemed to be that little fledgling America, righteous and innocent, had stood up to the big, nasty Brits and taught them a lesson.



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It wasn't until I visited the Brock monument in Queenston, Ontario, and the various historical museums across the Niagara River that I began to understand the other side of the War of 1812.

The monument marks the site where Major General Isaac Brock fell during the Battle of Queenston Heights, a victory for British, Canadian and First Nation militias that momentarily halted the highly imperialistic American invasion of Canada.

It's this side of the story that Canadian author James E. Elliott tells in his new book, "**Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813**" (Robin Brass, \$27.95).

In 1812 Upper and Lower Canada were "sparsely populated and undeveloped; they were thinly garrisoned and irresistibly tempting to the [American] promoters of a philosophical notion that 30 years on would become known as Manifest Destiny," he writes.

In other words, we wanted Canada, and we were going to take it by force if necessary. Problem was, we couldn't. Despite extreme advantages in both numbers and weaponry, the scrappy Canadians continually beat us back.

"After just two months of war, the Federal Republican [newspaper] in Washington declared: 'Disgrace has been brought upon the American arms and the character of the nation is tarnished.'"

The farthest we ever made it into Canada was the small town

of Stoney Creek, near the head of Lake Ontario. American Major General Henry Dearborn had taken Fort George on the Niagara Peninsula, but failed to rout the enemy, allowing them to escape and regroup for the Battle of Stoney Creek, a decisive victory for Canada.

Elliott relates the details of this little-known but thrilling nighttime clash with the panache of a good novelist. "Strange Fatality" is history, to be sure, but it's also a page-turner.

The cast of characters is large, and we get to know common soldiers — James Crawford of Mercer, for one — as well as famed military figures like Winfield Scott.

The book includes eight appendixes, with complete casualty lists and a fascinating history of what Elliott calls "the Second Battle of Stoney Creek" — the unexpectedly difficult effort by Canadian citizens to erect a monument at the battlefield.

"Strange Fatality" is a must-read for any American looking to fill in the gaps of our often misleadingly patriotic education.

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