

LOCAL

Something fishy about Billy Green?



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Who won the War of 1812, between sworn enemies Canada and the United States?

Look at the spoils. We got a country (our own), some might say an identity. They got a song no one can sing.

It could have gone the other way. If the Americans had prevailed, they would've moved right in with their four-down football.

As historian and former Spectator journalist James Elliott says, "They (the Americans) weren't playing catch and release" when they invaded.

In a sense, our early destiny as a nation was sprung free in that war, especially in the battle right here on our eastern flank in 1813, the farthest any invasion has ever reached into Canada. Hamilton drew the line.

The Battle of Stoney Creek was a "near-death experience," says Elliott, author of *Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813*, winner of the Ontario Historical Society Book Award.

He'll be guest speaker at The MacNab Circle's 44th annual dinner on Feb. 19 at the Scottish Rite.

Winning Stoney Creek meant that pre-confederated embryonic Canada could continue developing as it had, separately from the United States. Losing it, which almost happened (the British forces were vastly outnumbered by the Americans), could have spelled the end.

"The British were exhausted by Napoleon," says Elliott. Would they have continued to struggle for this "troublesome piece of snow?"

It is hard, given those stakes, to understand why the War of 1812 is so often neglected — maybe because no borders changed as a result of it.

"It is our origin story, our genesis," says Elliott.

But it won't be neglected on this, the 200th anniversary.

James' speech is but one of many markers of the occasion in the city this year.

The war is especially important here. We got a whale of a story from it. The legend of Billy Green.

We got a battlefield monument, and we've made a kind of mini-industry out of the memory of it, and squabbling over reconstruction of events — for instance, was Billy Green a hero or a myth, our attempt at a Laura Secord story?

By contrast, just about all the Americans got is their national anthem, based on a poem inspired by the defence of Fort McHenry in Baltimore.

Two hundred years later, rather than celebrating, Americans are still trying to remember the words, and get their voices around the spiny lobster of its range-testing melody.

Something else Hamilton got from the war was the emergence of Sir Allan MacNab.

"He was the boy hero," says Elliott. "MacNab was only 14 when the U.S. invaded York, and he was involved in the taking of Fort Niagara in 1813."

But he was also a loose cannon and tried single-handedly to invade the U.S. at Navy Island, where he set fire to an American ship and sent it over Niagara Falls.

These and other stories will be poked at during Elliott's much anticipated dinner speech.

But what might get the butter knives rattling and the table buns flying is Elliott's controversial contention that the Billy Green legend has no basis in fact.

He researched *Strange Fatality* for almost six years, and "nothing about it passes the smell test." It's based on a suspect diary.

Now he says, only half-jokingly, he looks under his car when he goes to Stoney Creek. He and other skeptics like city writer Colwyn Beynon have "kicked over a beehive."

Billy Green or not (the legend is the 19-year-old heroically got word of the American position to the British), the Battle of Stoney Creek was a dramatic, confusing, blunder-filled and at times heroic crossroads.

The crux was Sergeant Alexander Fraser's daring charge into the "teeth of the American guns," before they could reload and the capture of two American generals, in effect "decapitating the American army," says Elliott.

For more information on the dinner and Elliott's speech, go to hamiltonheritage.ca.

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