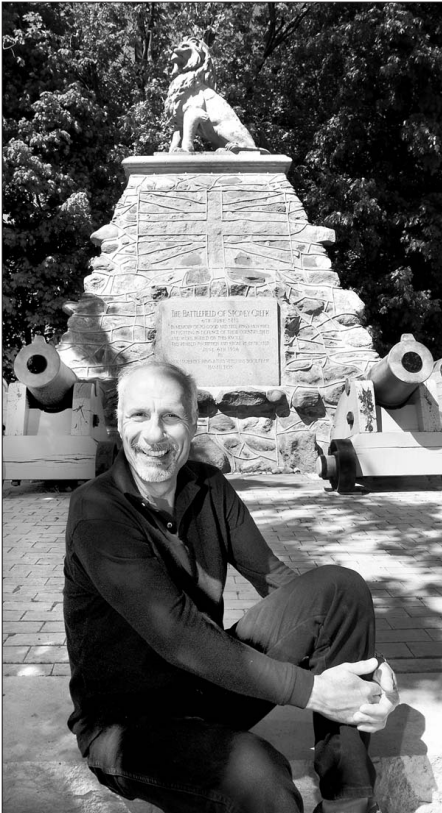


WEEKEND READER



KAZ NOVAK, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Author James E. Elliott devoted more than five years to researching the Battle of Stoney Creek.

Searching for the real picture

BY MARK McNEIL

The Battle of Stoney Creek lasted a matter of hours, but for author James E. Elliott, it consumed more than five years of his life as he tried to understand what really happened in the blood and darkness on that June evening in 1813.

The former Hamilton Spectator journalist and local history buff hunted for his narrative through a tangle of contradictory correspondence from long-dead military officers, inaccurate newspaper reporting from the time and less than comprehensive accounts by various historians over the years.

He took part in historical re-enactments of the battle. He spent countless hours by himself pacing over the battlefield site, and walking the invading army's route, trying to imagine "the terror of a night operation where you literally couldn't see anything. People were getting killed all around you. Sometimes your own people were firing at you."

Elliott wanted to understand the perspective of the individual soldier to write a popular account that would stand up to scrutiny from academics.

"It became a labour of love and I mean a real labour of love. There was nobody to interview and all the time I was thinking there is nobody out there who cares. There were a number of times, when I thought 'I am going to take this puppy out in the backyard and pour gasoline all over it and get it out of my life!'"

But he endured, producing his book *Strange Fatality*, an impressive account of a generally overlooked battle in North American history. Had the skirmish gone the other way, with the Americans winning, there would likely be Stars and Stripes flags hanging from flagpoles in Southern Ontario today.

Elliott's fascination with the topic began a decade ago when he wrote a lengthy piece about the battle for *The Spectator*.

"I didn't know anything about it before then," said Elliott, 63, who is originally from the Windsor area and moved to Hamilton in 1987. He is the author of *Ponies Rode Men*, about Loyalist pioneer settler Robert Land as well as *Billy Green And The Battle Of Stoney Creek*.

In 2003 he took a year's leave of absence from *The Spec* to work on *Strange Fatality* full time. He figured that would be plenty of time. How hard could it be?

But progress was slow. He extended the leave for three months, and then — in the face of rising pressure from his employer to return to work — he handed in his resignation to work on the project into the future unencumbered.

The more he looked into the story, the more he realized that its full dimensions had never been told. He took it as his destiny to fill the void.

The most notable previous effort was published in 1873 by Emerson Bristol Biggar, who interviewed some of his relatives who fought in the battle.

Historian Ernest Cruikshank took a stab at the topic 100 years after it happened. But apparently, no one in recent decades had seriously gone through the primary documents and various archival holdings until Elliott came along.

The basic story is that 700 British troops marched from Burlington Heights, near Dundurn Castle, to an American encampment near Stoney Creek. The British surprised the Americans in a night attack. But contrary to popular wisdom the battle was far from a rout.

Elliott says the outcome was as much about luck as it was about strategy for the British. "There was a lot of one step forward, one step back, one step sideways, kind of thing."

Elliott says he is relieved the book is finally done, after making so many steps forward and backward himself over the past five years. He has no plans to take any other writing project.

"I worked so hard on this. There were months where I put in hours far more than I would for a regular job. I need to decompress from this. I'm looking to be idle for awhile."

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