

The Battle of Lundy's Lane On the Niagara in 1814

Donald E. Graves. *The Battle of Lundy's Lane: On the Niagara in 1814*. (Baltimore, Maryland: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1993) 342 pages, \$24.99 US.

Battle campaigns of the War of 1812 generally go unnoticed in the larger history of warfare, and in many cases are neglected altogether by students of military history. Thus it is a matter for celebration *to* find a superb history of one such battle, Donald Graves' *Lundy's Lane*. This book promises to revive our interest in the Anglo-American war in which Canadians played such a conspicuous part in the defence of their homeland. More than this, however, this study will stimulate the reader to wonder why the great conflict ever happened in the first place and, equally important, to ponder the legacies of this bloodiest of Anglo-American encounters.

In one of the many quotations that pepper this book, with profit,

Donald Graves cites C.P. Stacey's quip: "The War of 1812 is one of those episodes in history that make everybody happy, because everybody interprets it in his own way. The Americans think of it primarily as a naval war in which the pride of the Mistress of the Seas was humbled by what an imprudent Englishman had called 'a few fir-built frigates manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws.' Canadians think of it equally pridefully as a war of defence in which their brave fathers... saved the country from conquest. And the English are the happiest of all because they don't even know it existed." These assessments derive basically from the fact that the war tended to settle few if any differences existing between the United Kingdom and the United States. Although the diplomacy of the war, and the making of the peace which followed it on Christmas Eve 1814, fall outside of the focus of this book we generally conclude that the war altered hardly at all the relations between the two powers: what mattered most was the successful defence of Canada. If Loyalist settlement moulded the political character of the western frontiers of what was then the Province of Quebec, and shaped the destiny of Upper Canada, then surely the War of 1812 congealed Canadian attitudes against any future American invasion. Lundy's Lane was the anvil, and here the Americans decided to hammer their great blow. They did not succeed.

On the sultry evening of 25 July 1814, almost within sight of Niagara Falls, American troops attacked British regular forces that were assisted by Canadian fencibles and militia. It was a savage encounter, the most bitterly contested in the War of 1812. It

began with parry and thrust, and continued into the night as troops, in pitch darkness, struck at the enemy with determination. What are now called "losses from friendly fire" were regular occurrences. The power of the Royal Artillery, advantageously placed on an eminence, wasted unprotected American infantry. Royal Scots and the 8th, 41st and 89th Regiments of Foot put up stout resistance. The officer commanding British forces was Canadian-born Sir Gordon Drummond, who was wounded, and his second-in-command was captured. By early the next day the British and Canadians had kept their ground, and the Americans retired toward Fort Erie, there to fight again in what is an important coda *to* this story.

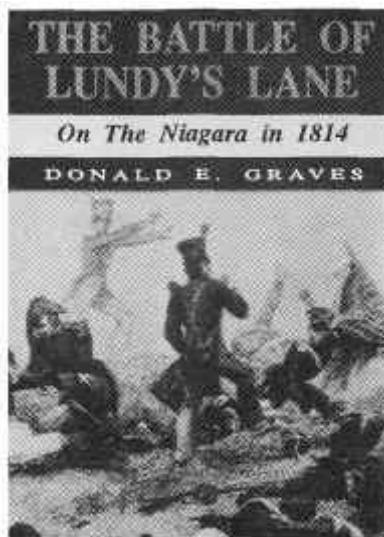
As a battle, Lundy's Lane offers the historian rich possibilities for research. Donald Graves has mastered all known sources. In particular he has used to great effect the official reports of General Drummond and those answering to him. Drummond faced two great adversaries, both of whom *went* on to subsequent distinguished careers in the United States Army—Major-General Jacob Jennings Brown and Brigadier-General Winfield Scott. The contribution of Lundy's Lane to the making of the careers of Drummond, Brown and Scott can be imagined, for all three went on to distinguished careers in the military and public service.

Graves scrupulously scans the official reports of these field commanders against other evidence, and it is pleasing to see him check Drummond's enthusiastic report on his own success. Similarly, Graves notes numerous how E.W. Cruikshank lacked full access to documentation that would have given a more even-handed assessment of

British successes. As Graves demonstrates (p.242), "when the fighting ended, the [American] Left Division was in possession of both the hill and the guns and withdrew of its own accord." Thus, sadly for Canadian history, the Americans were not expelled from the rise, as Cruikshank claimed, but withdrew of their own accord. In demonstrating this, and other wonderful particulars, Graves has used various diaries and newly-unearthed reports. One such is Private Shadrack Byfield's record, which provides one of the many narratives of the encounter. "We then moved on for the field of action," recollected Byfield of the 41st Foot. "We had a guide with us and when we came near the field, our captain was called upon, by name, in a loud voice, to form on the left of the speaker. It being night, we could not discover what regiment it was. The guide positively asserted that it was one of the enemy. Our bugle then sounded for the company to drop. A volley was then fired upon us, which killed two corporals, and wounded a sergeant, and several of the men. The company then rose, fired, and charged. The enemy quitted their position; we followed and took three field pieces." (p. 241) Collateral evidence from Thomas Jessup's memoir of the Niagara campaign sustains the view that the Americans withdrew of their own accord. The loser, in the end is historian Cruikshank, whom Donald Graves states was unaware of, or chose to omit, critically-important details. In reconstructing the last stage of the battle Graves has been circumspect in getting the sequence of events correct. He concludes that the bulk of the [British] Right Division did not reoccupy the hill, that companies of the 104th and 89th foot regiments

remained nearby until early dawn allowed them to discover, with delight, the vacant ground and unattended field pieces, once previously theirs. In short, the Left Division "voluntarily gave up both the hill and the captured artillery."

The battle is told in great detail, and the key characters enter and depart from the scene in a fashion characteristic of great historical narrative. The formalistic nature of early phases of the encounter offered great tactical opportunity to Scott and to Brown. But their successes, such as they were, were



bought at terrible costs of life and human suffering. Skilful British Artillery work was bound to falter with successive changes of light and determined enemy charges. Deployments and redeployments of skirmishing parties by both sides in a confined field of battle intersected by fences and surrounded by thickets made hand-to-hand combat a regular feature of the battle.

The costs, in killed and wounded, were staggering: the British line regiments together lost 84 officers and men killed, 559 wounded, 42 prisoners, and 193 missing—a total of 878 casualties,

that is, about 24 per cent of the British force engaged. Of the Canadian units, the Incorporated Militia suffered severely, losing 142 of 402 all ranks. Others including the Glengarry Light Infantry got off lightly. In total, British losses amount to about 800 men. American losses were similar, perhaps higher. Brown reported 860 casualties: more than twice as many American officers and men were killed in the encounter than British, primarily because of effective British artillery and heavier British musket ball. Some American units, particularly Scott's First Brigade, took terrible losses of thirty-five percent killed, wounded or missing. In truth, both sides suffered immeasurably, and the details of how death and dying occurred are the stuff of a John Keegan or a John Ellis. Here we have an excellent example of "sharp end" history.

Donald Graves has provided an excellent description and analysis of field medicine in practice. Case by case he examines howfield surgeons, such as William Dunlop of the 89th Foot, dealt with casualties. Amputation afforded an early, effective treatment, but had different theoretical foundations. Many casualties had suffered multiple wounds. Musket balls and artillery rounds did the greatest damage, and seventy-five percent of all wounds were inflicted in the torso and legs. Very few injuries were caused by edged weapons. Jagged fragments of howitzer and shrapnel shells created severe damage at their entry points; canister bullets, very damaging, often passed through the body; slower-moving musket balls were deflected by bone, cartilage or muscle. Treating of various wounds involved various techniques

and Instruments. Many wounded soldiers, such as the stoical Shadrack Byfield submitted quietly to losing an arm by amputation, and, in one of the many interesting snippets that pepper this book, we are told that Byfield, a weaver by trade, survived the amputation, had an artificial limb arranged for him, and pursued weaving in later years. We can marvel at the difficulties of the army surgeon, and as Dunlop put it correctly, "there is hardly on the face of the earth a less enviable situation than that of an Army Surgeon after a battle—worn out and fatigued in body and mind, surrounded by suffering, pain and misery, much of which he knows it is not in his power to heal or even to assuage. While battle lasts these all pass unnoticed, but they come before the medical man afterwards in all their sorrow and horror, stripped of all the excitement of the 'heady fight.'" (p. 175).

Students of military history, and the War of 1812 in particular, will welcome the extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary works. The work contains numerous illustrations and boasts a serviceable index. The book is enriched by several good maps that help the armchair observer follow the campaign. A note on terminology and time aids the reader to follow the sequence of the battle, and to differentiate between British and American forces. Wisely, ancillary data has been relegated to four appendixes: Order of Battle and Strength, Left Division, United States Army; Order of Battle and Strength, Right Division, British Army in Canada, 25 July 1814; The Military Heritage of the Battle of Lundy's Lane: Honors, Awards, and Descendants of the Units of 1814; The Problem of the Guns (which army was in possession of the British guns at

the end of the battle); and The Fate of the Battlefield, 1814-1992. In regards to the last of these, we learn, sadly (p.249) that little exists of the battlefield for the shaded lane of yesteryear is now a busy highway crowded with motels, eateries and souvenir shops. "You can sleep," writes Graves poignantly, "in air-conditioned comfort near the same spot where the four-times wounded Jessup formed the Twenty-Fifth into a single rank to repel Drummond's last desperate attack..." Nearby the Drummond Hill Cemetery tells a different tale, and in graves marked and unmarked lie British, Canadian and American bodies of this bloodiest of encounters on the Niagara.

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